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On 13 July Donald Trump was the target of an attempted assassination at a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania. The former president walked away with just a grazed ear – miraculously, according to his supporters – but the manifold oddities and unanswered questions left in the wake of the incident have created fertile ground for conspiracy theories. **NOEL ROONEY** surveys the scene.


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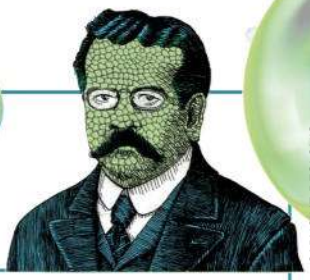
# EDITORIAL



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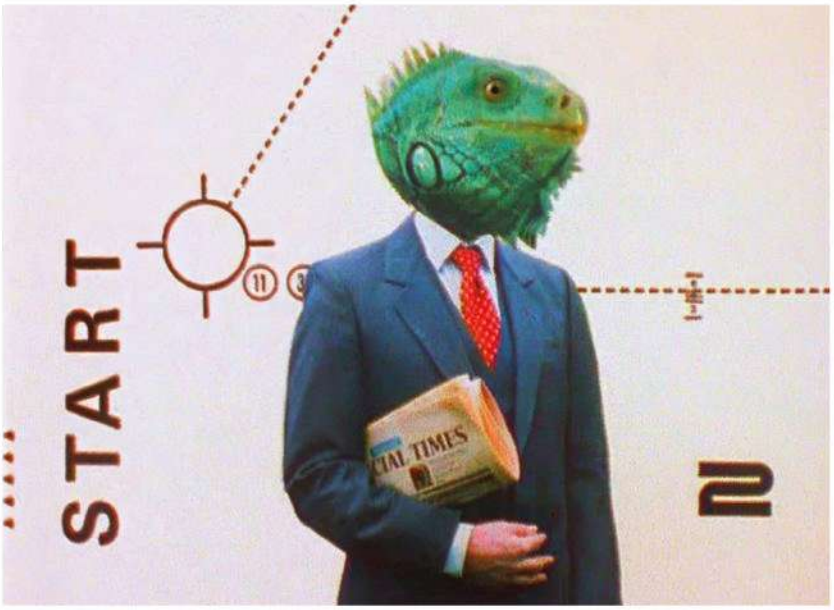


### MIRACULOUS, MYSTERIOUS AND DOWNRIGHT WEIRD

It's astonishing to realise that it's now nearly 30 years since *Fortean TV* made its debut on Britain's Channel 4. Riding high on a wave of interest in all things paranormal – *The X-Files*, by now in its fourth season, had become one of television's 'must-watch' shows and *Fortean Times* had gone monthly the previous year – *Fortean TV* took a new approach to the suddenly hot topic of weird stuff, using quirky visuals and an irreverent approach to create a televisual equivalent of *FT*, often drawing on stories first covered in these pages; the icing on the cake was that the new show was presented by the Reverend Lionel Fanthorpe, soon to be a fortean household name, legendary UnCon speaker and frequent *FT* contributor. The goggle-eyed Ryan Shirlow, now fully recovered from his marathon *FT* rewatches of Arthur C Clarke's *Mysterious World* and *Strange Powers*, now turns his attention to this endearingly eccentric time-capsule of Nineties weirdness; tune in to p.28 for the first part of his survey.

Fast-forward to summer 2024, where the political has taken a turn both dark and strange with the attempted assassination of former president Donald Trump (not to mention the week-long disappearance and behind-the-scenes removal of current president Joe Biden). The fallout from the events of 13 July in Butler, Pennsylvania, is very much ongoing (as we go to press, Secret Service head Kimberley Cheatle has resigned), with an almost daily revelation of new oddities, which means that our coverage of the story (see p.4-5 and 42-45) can only be provisional; expect further updates in future issues.

### ERRATA

**FT445:2:** Mark Pearson wrote in with further details about the alleged 'Baba Yaga' drones allegedly used by Ukrainian forces to swoop down and drag wounded enemy troops from the battlefield. We'd already muddied the waters with a miscaptioned photograph (**FT439:22**), as pointed out by Mark in his previous erratum. But now Mark writes that "the 'Baba Yaga' drones seem to actually exist! In early June on the BBC News there was an item following a particular Ukrainian frontline unit that operated drones that picked up and recovered arms and ammunition from dead Russian soldiers. While not being the 'Witch from the Skies' terror weapon that Chechen troops appeared to accuse Ukrainian armed forces of using, they did have some kind of grabbing device, if not looking like big claws."

**FT445:13:** Gregory Sumrall from Mississippi spotted a mistake in the Strange Days item "Eclipse vs Apocalypse" where we referred to Marjorie Taylor Greene as a "noted MAGA senator and conspiracy theorist". Gregory points out that "She is not a senator, but a representative from Georgia in the US House of Representatives. Also, most other Republicans consider her to be a basket case, so she isn't truly representative of Republicans, including most MAGA Republicans."

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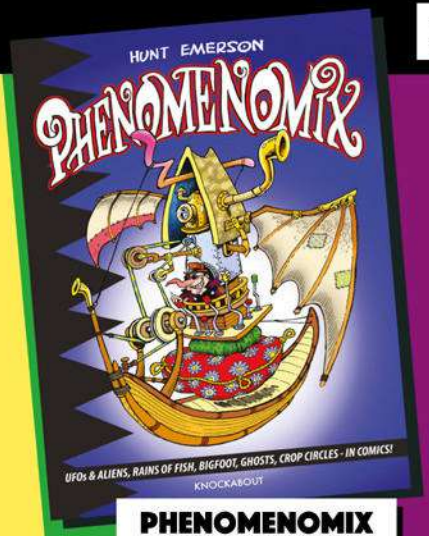


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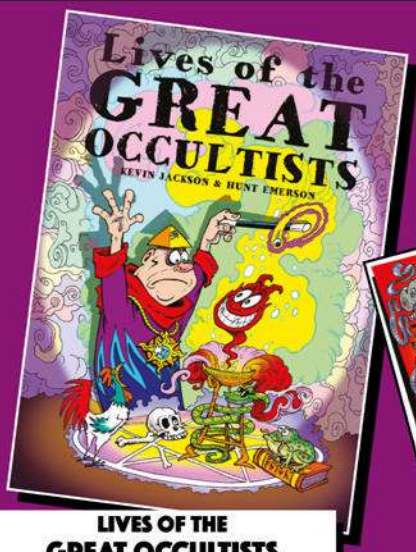


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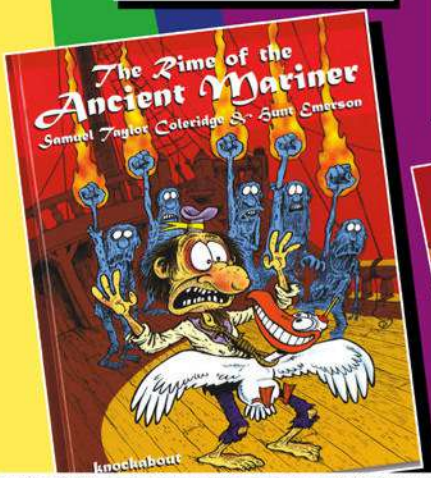


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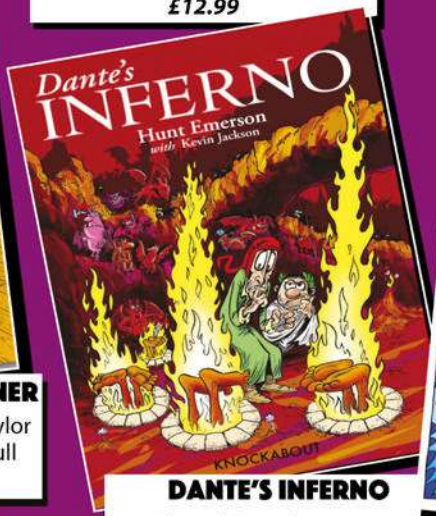


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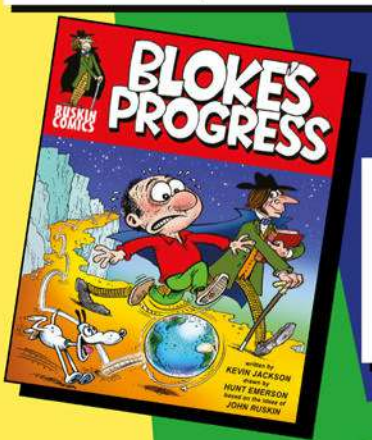


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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

# STRANGE DAYS

## MIRACLE NEAR-MISS | Did God save Donald Trump from an assassin's bullet – or was the whole thing staged?

Given the febrile atmosphere around the US presidential election and the propensity of Americans to see signs, portents and conspiracies around any historic event, the recent attempted assassination of Donald Trump at a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, was inevitably going to generate all of these, and they started within moments of the gunshot.

Almost immediately "Staged" trended on X/Twitter, rapidly outstripping all other terms, although analysis found that 45 per cent of accounts spreading allegations that Trump had staged the assassination attempt were bots and fake accounts. The focus of many of these claims was a photo taken of Trump seconds after the bullet allegedly clipped his ear – some commentators suggested that Trump's injury was, in fact, caused by a shard of glass from a shattered teleprompter – which was said to be "too perfect". Showing a blood-streaked Trump standing tall and proudly raising his fist, surrounded by Secret Service agents against a backdrop of an American flag, it does make an almost cliched image of heroic defiance. It was, though, taken by Evan Vucci, the Associated Press's chief photographer in Washington, who was already at the foot of the stage when the incident occurred, and being a highly professional photographer, knew an iconic shot when it presented itself.

Trump's pose has caused suspicion, with critics comparing the Secret Service's actions to those of agents around Ronald Reagan when he was shot. Then, they swiftly covered the President and bundled him into a car so violently that Reagan thought his wound was a broken rib resulting from their actions. Retired agents suggested that if the Secret Service were following procedure Trump would never have been allowed to expose himself to further fire by a possible second shooter by striking his "hero" pose, which led to suggestions the agents were complicit in a staging; a second shot was said to show one agent smiling broadly directly into the camera, although this was soon revealed to be a fake.

ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

**ABOVE:** One of the already iconic images taken by photographer Evan Vucci showing a bloodied, fist-pumping Trump being led from the podium by Secret Service agents.

*Suspicious viewers have been slowing down videos for frame-by-frame analysis*

Inevitably, suspicious viewers have been slowing down videos for amateur frame-by-frame analysis. This, they claim, reveals what seems to be a yellow object in the hand Trump put to his ear after shots were fired, asserting that this was a pack of fake blood used to simulate injury as part of the staged attack, which would also have needed Secret Service complicity. Amateur analysis of video showing Secret Service agents before the shooting has been used to suggest complicity too, as they seem to be getting audience members to duck a fraction of a second before the shots can be heard. Dominic Michael Tripi, a political analyst, shared a video saying, "This video of a woman located behind Donald Trump during his attempted assassination is HIGHLY suspicious, her body language & behaviour seem to indicate she knew that something was coming." Conversely, someone who didn't duck also caused comment. This was Vincent Fusca, who can be seen to remain standing behind Trump while everyone else ducks following the shots. Fusca is a prominent figure in QAnon and believed by many in that movement to be John F Kennedy Jr (which would also make him the mysterious 'Q' himself), who had escaped his alleged plane crash death 25 years ago and secretly returned to fight the Satanic pædophile deep state. QAnon orthodoxy, in so far that there is one, firmly believed Fusca/JFK Jr/'Q' would be Trump's vice-presidential running mate pick for the 2024 election (he announced that he had chosen JD Vance the day after). Fusca's alleged insider status and

## SENT BY SNAIL MAIL

Another delivery of long-delayed letters

PAGE 8

## FOSSIL FORGERY

Prehistoric lizard turns out to be a fake

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## SIGNS AND WONDERS

Miracles under scrutiny across Europe

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lack of action is taken to mean that he knew the assassination attempt was faked.

The fact that the shooter, Thomas Matthew Crooks, was able to get into position on a roof within firing range without being detected also fed into the "staged" narrative, and it is claimed that once he was there, snipers did see him but did not fire on him until he had shot at Trump. However, the fact that they immediately killed him is also being viewed as suspicious, as it prevented him talking, despite this being standard procedure. The identity and motive of Crooks is raising suspicion, as, while once when younger he did donate a small amount to a left-wing cause, he seems to have been registered as a Republican voter and investigators have found no notes, messages or other evidence that might suggest a motive for trying to kill Trump. This is beginning to generate allegations that he was "mind controlled" by Antifa or similar. Initially, before Crooks's identity was firmly established, social media identified the shooter as Maxwell Yearick, an anti-Trump activist who had previously served a prison sentence for violence against the police at a 2016 rally. They then switched blame to "Mark Violets", an alleged Antifa member, using photos of Marco Violi, an Italian football journalist, who was not even in the US at the time.

One thing that the assassination attempt has made clear, is that wild conspiracy theories are not the sole preserve of the far right. Many of the "staged" allegations have come from what has been dubbed "BlueAnon", centrist Democrat supporters who are being portrayed as their equivalent of the QAnon fantasists, although they lack QAnon's level of organisation and ideology. "I can totally see Trump 'sacrificing' one of his cult followers to make his 'assassination attempt' look more realistic and believable," wrote @LakotaMan1, a well-known pro-Democrat influencer, commenting on the fact that an audience member, Corey Comperatore, 50, was killed, and two more seriously wounded. Elsewhere Democratic political advisor Dmitri Mehlhorn said, "Not one newspaper or opinion leader in America is willing to openly consider the possibility that Trump and Putin staged this on purpose. Ask the question, people," although he later withdrew the comment.

**ABOVE:** QAnoner Vincent Fusco, believed by many in the movement to be John F Kennedy Jr, who died in a plane crash in 1999. **BELOW:** Angels watching over the Donald? Some interpreted this tangled US flag as looking like a protecting angel.

TWITTER / X

Finally, no event like this would be complete without its own alleged miracle, and this was duly provided by a video of a tangled American flag hanging over the arena in Butler that has a passing resemblance to an image of an angel. This was taken to mean that Trump had been saved by divine intervention and has an angel watching over him, with one commentor on the video saying, "The Holy Spirit was definitely there protecting him yesterday," and another, "We are living in historic times! The fingerprints of the divine all over". *BBC News, dailygrail.com, 14 Jul; nypost.com, 15 Jul; telegraph.co.uk, 16 Jul 2024.*

For more on the Butler shooting, see pp.42-45.

## EXTRA! EXTRA!

FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

### SHEEP CUT & EXPLODED

Sussex Express, 10 Nov 2023.

### Demons get a wake-up call

(Brisbane) Courier-Mail, 13 Nov 2023.

### RABID TEENS STEAL MAN'S CRUTCH

(Sydney) Daily Telegraph, 17 Feb 2024.

### Cat relaxes in Mexico as she prepares for new role

D.Mail, 28 Feb 2024

### RARE WORM-EATING GHOST SLUG SPOTTED ON STROUD FOOTPATH

BBC News, 27 Mar 2024.

### Escaped cloned female mutant crayfish take over Belgian cemetery

D.Telegraph, 24 Oct 2020.

## SIDELINES

### SATO SIMULATION

In Japan, the law requires couples to choose between their surnames when they marry, and 96 per cent choose the man's name (same sex marriage is still illegal there). However, a simulation run by Professor Hiroshi Yoshida at Tohoku University has shown that if this trend continues, everyone in Japan will have the surname "Sato" in just over 500 years' time. While Satos only made up 1.529 percent of the population in 2023, their numbers grew by 1.0083 times from 2022 to 2023, so, making the vast assumption that this growth rate continues, Yoshida concluded that by 2532 everyone will be named Sato. *iflscience.com, 3 Apr 2024.*

### TOTO-LY WIRED

Namibia's Namib desert, the oldest in Africa, is the site for a new art installation by Namibian-German artist Max Siedentopf. Made up of six speakers and an MP3 player powered by solar panels, the piece is named *Toto Forever* and plays a single song, Toto's *Africa,* on a continuous loop. Siedentopf said he hopes the song will play for another 55 million years although he admits that "Some [Namibians] love it and some say it's probably the worst sound installation ever," adding, "I think that's a great compliment." *globalnews.ca, 15 Jan 2019.*

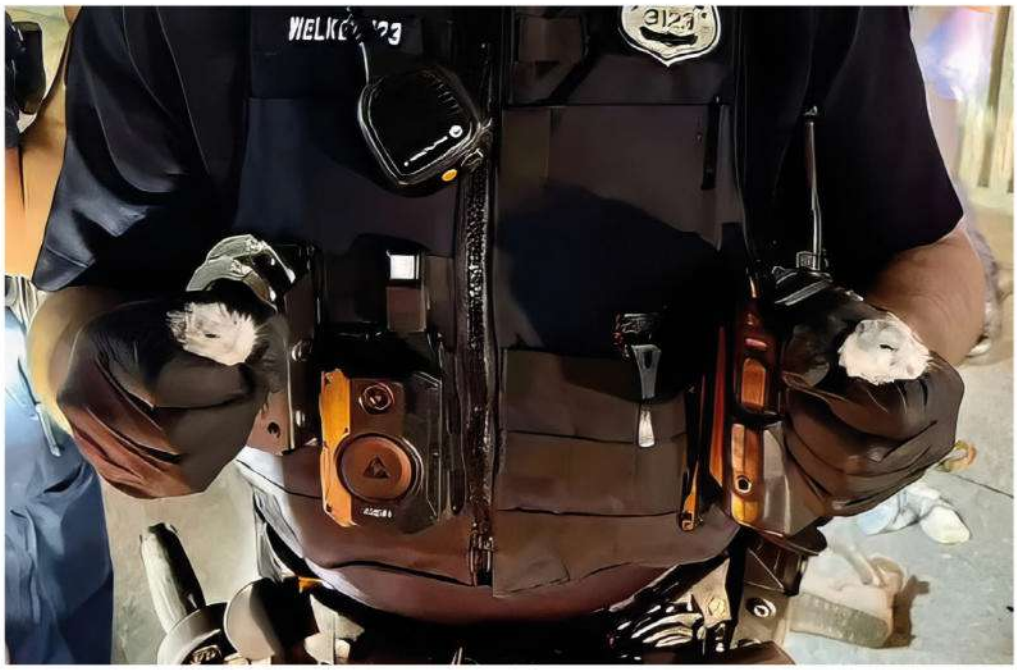
### FACE OFF

Lego lawyers sent a request to Murrieta Police Department in California asking them to stop posting pictures of criminals on Instagram with images of Lego Minifigure heads superimposed over their faces. The department had started doing this to protect the identities of people they arrested after a new law prevented them from sharing suspect images for nonviolent crimes – they are now using emojis and cartoon characters instead. *metro.co.uk, 25 Mar 2024.*

MARTIN ROSS

# WEIRD WILDLIFE

**Bizarre bee tales, fake pandas and a man with hamsters in his pants**



COLUMBUS POLICE DEPARTMENT

**ABOVE:** Two of the hamsters rescued from Matthew Pancake's pants. **BELOW:** The huge bee colony in the walls of a child's room.

### IN MY PANTS!

Chinese customs officers arrested a man attempting to cross from Hong Kong into Shenzhen after discovering he had more than 100 live snakes in his trousers. A statement issued by Chinese authorities said, "Upon inspection, customs officers discovered that the pockets of the trousers the passenger was wearing were packed with six canvas drawstring bags and sealed with tape. Once opened, each bag was found to contain living snakes in all kinds of shapes, sizes and colours," many of which were non-native species, including milk snakes and corn snakes.

Meanwhile, in Columbus, Ohio, police arrested the wonderfully named Matthew Pancake, 31, after he broke into a restaurant, a shoe store and finally a pet shop, where he released several birds and some puppies. He was later found sleeping on a bench dressed in a leopard pattern onesie. Bodycam video from the police shows officers searching Pancake and saying, "There's multiple gerbils in his pants – do you have any more gerbils on you?" The officers found four animals, which turned out to be hamsters rather than gerbils, plus bedding, concealed in Pancake's onesie, and returned them unharmed to the pet shop. *theguardian.com, abcnews.com, boingboing.net, 10 Jul 2024.*

*Pancake broke into a pet store and released several puppies*

### BEEHAVE!

After weeks of being told by her toddler daughter that there were "monsters" making a noise in her wardrobe, Ashley Massis Class and her husband, from North Carolina, discovered she was right. Finding a handful of bees buzzing about the attic of their home, they called in a pest control company, who sent a beekeeper to the property to investigate. The beekeeper used a thermal camera to see if they could locate a bee colony in the house, and found a massive hive built within the walls of their daughters' room. Before he had even put his protective clothing on, the beekeeper "took a hammer and knocked into the wall", Massis Class said, "and bees came swarming out like a horror movie – there were streams of bees, and the wall where he hit was oozing honey. But it looked like blood because it was really, really dark, running down my daughter's pink walls. It looked really strange." Beekeepers went on to remove tens of thousands of bees and a honeycomb weighing more than 100lb (45kg). As a result, Massis Class was able to tell her

ASHLEY MASSIS CLASS / TIKTOK

daughter they now believed her, and that "Mr Monster Hunter" was removing all the bees. *theguardian.com, 30 Apr 2024.*

### BUBBLEBEES?

Following an experimental error, bee researchers at the University of Guelph, Canada, made a startling discovery. The scientists mistakenly submerged hibernating queens of the common eastern bumblebee (Bombus impatiens) underwater for a week, and when they rescued them, they were amazed to find they had survived. Lead researcher Nigel Raine, a professor in the school of environmental sciences at the university, said that it was "really surprising", adding: "These are terrestrial organisms – they're not really designed to be underwater." Setting out to explore their discovery in more detail, they kept 143 common eastern bumblebee queens underwater for periods of up to seven days, discovering that the submerged bees had similar survival rates to those kept in the dry. During the cold season, queens of this species hibernate alone in small burrows in well-drained soil in banks, and Raine's team believe the bees' resilience when submerged is an adaptation to flooding. *editions.cnn.com, 17 Apr 2024.*

### BEEZARRE!

On 31 May, hundreds of dead bumblebees, many clumped together, were found alongside a pathway in the village of Golpsie in Sutherland. David Mackay, of conservation organisation NatureScot, said "It's not something I've ever come across before," and had some of the dead bees sent to the Bumblebee Conservation Trust for analysis, although they seem not to have been able to determine a cause of death. However, local resident Douglas Mackay later came forward to say that he had seen a strange "orange ball" in the sky over the location of the deaths at around the time they are believed to have taken place. "I was standing in my back garden probably about 8pm… when I spotted an orange light coming in over the sea probably 50 to 100ft [15-30m] above the water," he said. "At first, I thought it was a helicopter but soon realised it wasn't. It was a perfect orange ball and continued over the village rooftops heading straight towards me, it then rose up as it approached the hospital quite sharply and vanished," he added. "I would say the size of this phenomenon I saw was huge and would compare it to the size I can see the full Moon. Unfortunately, I didn't have my phone with me, and the timescale was probably 10 to 15 seconds. What got me was the perfect orange colour, it wasn't glowing or anything, just a perfect orange circle." *johnogroat.journal.co.uk, 9 Jul 2024.*

**ABOVE**: The disappointing 'panda dogs'on display in Taizhou Zoo in Jiangsu province: a pair of Chow Chows with trimmed and dyed fur.

### PANDA FRAUD

Taizhou Zoo in Jiangsu Province, China, is the latest Chinese zoo to cause offence by exhibiting allegedly fraudulent animals – in this case, two Chow Chow dogs with their fur trimmed and dyed to look like pandas. The zoo says that they presented the animals as "panda dogs" because they didn't have any actual pandas to display, but deny claims of animal cruelty and fraud, explaining that they only used natural dyes on the dogs and advertised the creatures as "Xiong Mao Quan", which translates literally as "panda dogs". "We are not charging extra. The wording featuring Chow Chow dogs is correct and exactly describes what they are, so we are not cheating our visitors," said a member of the zoo's staff. Nonetheless, the animals have boosted zoo visitor numbers considerably and a lawyer quoted in local media said, "Inevitably the visitors will feel disappointed and deceived upon discovering the truth." *globaltimes.cn, mirror.co.uk, 6 May 2024.*

### DOG TREK

Ater last issue's cat treks, we now have a travelling dog. Terrier mix Mishka made a trek from California to the suburbs of Detroit, 2,000 miles (3,219km) away. Police in Harper Woods picked up the stray dog and took her to the Grosse Pointe Animal Adoption Society, who swiftly discovered her identity via her chip. Her owner Mehrad Houman and his family were visiting Minnesota shortly after Mishka was found, so drove for 10 hours to Michigan to collect her. The dog had wandered away from Houman's auto repair garage in San Diego almost a year before she was rescued and had never returned. "We think it was stolen and then it was sold and ended up in Michigan," said Corinne Martin, director of the animal welfare group. Vet Nancy Pillsbury, who checked Mishka over, said, "She was clean, well-fed. Whoever had her took good care of her," adding, "How she got here – that's a story only Mishka knows." *abc7news.com, 9 Apr 2024.*

## SIDELINES

### LUCKY LANDING

A paraglider in his 60s who was taking part in a glide near Sheffield had a lucky escape when his parachute failed and he plummeted groundward, only to have his fall broken by a large tent-like structure used to store salt grit, with a roof described as "springy". A spokesperson for the firefighters who rescued him said that "The flexible nature of the structure meant the man suffered only minor injuries" and that he had been "incredibly lucky". *examinerlive.co.uk, 31 Mar 2024.*

### FASCIST FOOTWARE FAIL

Sportswear company Adidas stopped buyers of the latest German national team football shirt customising the numbers on the back after realising that "44" in the official font bore a close resemblance to the Nazi SS lightning symbol. Historian Michael König said the kit's design was "very questionable", but company spokesperson Oliver Brüggen apologised, saying the resemblance was unintentional. *theguardian.com, 1 Apr 2024.*

### NOT FOOLING ANYONE

Russian forces in Ukraine are attempting to mislead enemy pilots about the strength and location of their aircraft by painting hyper-realistic images of planes onto tarmac at their air bases. Unfortunately (for them) they were rumbled when satellite photos revealed that careless helicopter pilots were repeatedly leaving their craft parked on the painted decoys. *standard.co.uk, 2 Apr 2024.*

### WRONG RIVER

An attempt to boost the stock of chinook salmon in Oregon's Imnaha River misfired when the tanker delivering 102,000 juvenile fish from the Lookingglass Hatchery left the road on a tight turn. This resulted in the truck overturning and rolling into Lookingglass Creek. The driver escaped with minor injuries, and 25,000 fish died either in the tanker or on the creek banks, but 77,000 escaped into the water, boosting Lookingglass Creek's salmon population instead of the Imnaha River's. In the long term, this is expected to lead to around 350-700 additional adults returning there. *BBC News, 3 Apr 2024.*

## SIDELINES...

### CHRIS THE LORD

Clergy at Acomb Parish Church in York were a little surprised when they found their Easter banners read "Chris is Risen" after an error at the printers. Curate Ned Lunn said the error was spotted before they were delivered, but added "The pastor at the Baptist Church is actually called Chris and he's got to get up for a sunrise service at 6.30am on Easter Sunday – his predecessor didn't manage to get up for the service last year". *BBC News, 25 Mar 2024.*

### HAIR TRIGGER

As part of their search for fugitive Daniel Kellaway, 29, wanted for driving offences, criminal damage and threatening behaviour, Avon and Somerset police asked for information in a Facebook post. They described him as "white, about 5ft 9ins, of average build, with brown eyes, receding brown hair, and facial hair". This clearly offended Kellaway, who responded with a comment saying, "No need to mention the hairline," adding, "I'm heading to Turkey to get it sorted then we will catch up." *Metro.co.uk, 2 Apr 2024.*

### DON'T FEAR THE REAPER

Before Sharon Taffs, 68, from Maldon in Essex, died of breast cancer she made her daughter and a friend promise that the Grim Reaper would attend her funeral. The friend had joked that he would come dressed as the reaper and point to people saying, "You're next," and Taff decided that he should do it. "We were just fulfilling her wish," said Taff's daughter Louise Miller, 49. "If you research the Grim Reaper, he transports the soul to where it's going, so he's not actually a bad person." *bbc.co.uk. news, 2 Apr 2024.*

MARTIN ROSS

# LOST IN THE POST

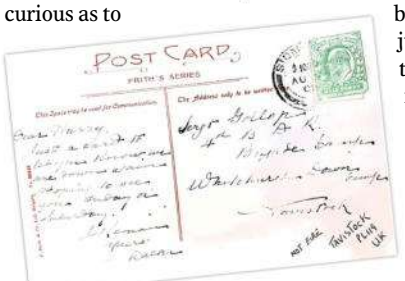
**Another sackload of long-delayed mail makes its way to Fortean Towers**

JESSICA MEANS / FACEBOOK

**ABOVE:** Jessica Means and the surprise postcard she received from Paris; it had been posted in 1969 and had taken 54 years to reach its destination in Maine. **BELOW:** A card sent to Harry Gollop in 1910 was found in a delivery office in 2024.

In February, the Royal Mail delivery office in Tavistock, Devon, spotted a postcard in the incoming mail that was postmarked August 1910 and carried a green Edward VII halfpenny stamp. As the postcard was part of a numbered series produced by Francis Frith, it was possible to confirm that it did indeed come from 1910. It was addressed to a Sergeant Harry Gollop who was taking part in an Army training camp at Brigade Camp on Whitchurch Down at the time, with the sender saying: "Just a note to let you know we are down again. Hoping to see you Friday or Saturday. I remain yours Walter." It seems that it had gone astray because the camp was temporary and the card had been mistakenly sent to Ireland first before being redirected, but it is unclear why it took so long to make its way back. A Royal Mail spokesperson said, "Events like this are very rare. The postcard arrived at our delivery office in Tavistock yesterday and we are certainly curious as to how it came to appear in our system after such a long period of time. Unfortunately, the address it was posted to no longer exists." *tavistock.today.co.uk, 15 Feb 2024.*

> *"Dear folks, by the time you get this I will have long since been home"*




• It took 54 years and a somewhat convoluted route for a 1969 postcard from Paris to reach its destination in Maine, USA. Jessica Means was surprised to receive the card, which was addressed to "Mr & Mrs Rene Gagnon or current resident". It had clearly been posted long ago, but seems to have been redirected in 2023 as it had a postmark of 12 July 2023, from Tallahassee, and a new stamp plus the "or current resident" had been added. The card, from someone named Roy, read "Dear folks, By the time you get this I will have long since been home, but it just seems proper to send this from the Tour Eiffel, where I am now. Don't have a chance to see much but having fun". Posting the card on Facebook, Means said: "Help me solve this mystery! Please repost/share. I'd love to learn how this made its way home across the decades. Maybe you or someone you know remembers the Gagnons or has a clue as to who might have mailed this from Tallahassee in 2023!" She knew that the Gagnons had originally built her house and lived there until the 1980s, but she had no idea where their relatives were now. However, she said, "I'd really like to say thank you to whoever decided to… drop it in the mail," adding, "I just want that person to know that the card not only made it, but that that one small, simple gesture made my day." *hindustantimes.com, 21 Jul 2023.*

• Even more unusual were the postcards received by Steve Senior from Lenham, Kent, who got two long-delayed postcards on consecutive days. The first, addressed to "Mrs Freeman", had been sent by someone named Richard who was camping in Scotland, while the second, also to Mrs Freeman, arrived from Denmark the following day. The stamp on the Scottish one was a 4½p one, which went out of circulation in 1974, so it

means the card was likely to have been sent sometime in the early 1970s and had taken over 50 years to wend its way to its destination. Both stamps, though, had only been franked recently. Senior was intrigued and said, "I thought they looked a bit odd; I am going to ask the neighbours if anybody knows Mrs Freeman." Once again, the Royal Mail commented that "Incidents like this are rare." *D.Express, 12 Feb 2024.*

• Forty-two years after it was put into a post box in Sydney, Australia, on 27 August 1981, a postcard featuring a picture of Sydney Opera House was delivered to its destination in Elm Grove, Westgate, Kent. The person to whom it was addressed had moved out long ago and instead it was picked up by the children of current resident, Samantha Williams, who at first thought it was a Christmas card. "It had been sent from a man called Gerry in Sydney and addressed to Steve Padgett or Padge, who we believe lived here with his parents in the 1980s," said Williams. "It's only got a 32-cent stamp on it, so maybe it's been stuck at a sorting office in Australia or in the UK for more than 40 years. We would love to find the man it was addressed to and give it to him. They were obviously good friends, and it may mean a lot to him." The Royal Mail said: "It is difficult to speculate what may have happened to this item of mail, but it is likely that it was put back into the postal system by someone recently, rather than it being lost or stuck somewhere. Royal Mail regularly checks all its delivery offices and clears its processing machines daily." They added, with commendable determination: "Once an item is in the postal system then it will be delivered to the address on the card." *BBC News, 8 Dec 2023.*

• More understandable is the delay to the postcard that Sherry Kirkvold sent herself from Floreana Island in the Galapagos, which took 33 years to catch up with her. Floreana does not have a formal postal service, but at Post Office Bay visitors can drop off postcards and letters in old whale oil barrels. Other visitors who are heading home and live close to recipients can then pick them up and deliver them by hand. Kirkvold's card was collected by Susan Fanning just a few weeks after Kirkvold dropped it at Post Office Bay on 15 March 1991. She gave it to her brother-in-law, who lived near the address Kirkvold had put on the card, and he went to drop it off, but by then Kirkvold had moved. He managed to get a new address so Fanning could redirect the card; however, by the time she tried to deliver it there, Kirkvold had moved again, and the trail went cold. Before the Internet, there was no easy way to track people down, so Fanning kept the card. Early this year, she came across the card again and decided to google 'Sherry Kirkvold', successfully finding a phone number. Fanning called the number, and this time Kirkvold was there, so Fanning could get an address, finally enabling her to send on the postcard. "Sherry was so excited and so was I," said Fanning. "It was just so fun to finally make the connection. It's a beautiful thing." *timescolonist.com, 3 May 2024.*

**ABOVE:** This postcard of Sydney Opera House was sent in 1981 and took 42 years to reach Westgate in Kent; its intended recipient was long gone.

• While most delayed mail arrives at its destination long after the intended recipients have departed, a card sent to Alphie Meleyal in Hull did reach her, despite taking 27 years to do so. Posted in Wolverhampton, it was sent to a former address of Meleyal's by the mother of her ex-partner, Mandy, after they split up. In it, Mandy's mother expressed her sadness at the breakup and said she hoped the two young women would remain friends. Jackie Hill who now lives in the property said she was "shocked" when the envelope, with a 26p stamp on it arrived: "I didn't realise it had a 1997 postmark until someone pointed it out!" She then set out to track down Meleyal, and managed to finally get the card to her. Meleyal said, "I was shocked, but pleased as punch, that someone was thinking of me all that time ago," adding, "At first I thought it was a joke, but when I got the letter, I was excited, and when I found out who it was from, I was really touched. I am so happy I got it." Meleyal said that she is still in contact with Mandy and meets up with her at least once a year, so "everything in the card had come true." *BBC News, 5 Apr 2024.*

• Six months after his 10th birthday, a card arrived for a boy in Reading, named only as Alfie, from his aunt and uncle. His father, Richard, was slightly surprised to have to pay an extra £2.50 to have it delivered, though, because the post office claimed the stamp was no longer valid. On opening the card, they found it read "To Alfie, lots of love on your first birthday. From Auntie Sally and Uncle Pat": it was nine years late, not just six months. This time, the Royal Mail said they "could not speculate" on why the letter was so late but compensated the family with £10.80 and sent them a book of eight first-class stamps, plus a £10 cheque for Alfie as a gesture of goodwill. *BBC News, 22 Apr 2024.*

# SIDELINES...

## SNAKES ON A BIKE

Dave Craker, 62, from Worthing, West Sussex, returned home from a motorbike tour of Europe after his right leg became swollen and painful. Doctors said something had probably bitten him and gave him antibiotics, but these had no effect. Several days later he noticed an evil smell coming from his BMW motorbike and behind a panel he found the mangled remains of a snake, later identified as a European viper. "I realised that's what had bitten me," Craker said. The doctors who gave him the antivenom were amazed that he hadn't at least lost the leg and said that most people die within 48 hours of a viper bite if it's not treated. *Sun, 9 Oct 2023.*

## TUMBLEWEED TERROR

On 2 March, residents of South Jordan, a suburb of Salt Lake City, Utah, awoke to find the whole area had been blanketed with tumbleweed. "People woke up Saturday morning and it looked like these huge walls had been erected made of tumbleweed," said Dawn Ramsey, South Jordan's mayor. "We had entire streets in some of our neighbourhoods completely blocked. They wrapped around homes." Some people were trapped in their houses until city work crews could shift the plants, removing 13 dumpster loads. "I think every tumbleweed in the entire Salt Lake County made its way into South Jordan," said Ramsey. *[AP] 5 Mar 2024.*

## MODEST MISS

Damion Green, 40, ran for a city council seat in Rainier, Washington State. On election day, though, he decided not to vote for himself. "I didn't feel comfortable. I thought it was kind of narcissistic, so I didn't," he said. He lost the seat by a single vote. *D. Mirror, 9 Dec 2023.*

## FAT FREDDY'S RAT?

Lobbying for a move to a new headquarters, New Orleans police chief Anne Kirkpatrick complained about dereliction and uncleanliness in their current buildings. It seems a particular problem is drug-addled rats. "The uncleanliness is off the charts," complained Kirkpatrick. The resulting rodent infestations, meant that rats were getting into the evidence rooms. "The rats are eating our marijuana," Kirkpatrick said. "They're all high." *nola.com, 11 Mar 2024.*

## SIDELINES...

### FLAMINGONE

Berlin zoo is mourning the death of its oldest resident, a 75-year-old flamingo named Ingo, also the world's oldest known flamingo. Where he came from is unknown, but he had been at the zoo since the mid-1950s and had a leg ring reading "Cairo, 23.6.1948" indicating what is believed to be his minimum age. The zoo described Ingo the Flamingo as "truly a legend". *<i>, 9 Feb 2024*

### CHOCOLATE ARCHÆOLOGY

A supermarket worker in Australia found an unopened bar of chocolate from the 2000 Sydney Olympics wedged between two shelves during a shop refit. The 250g bar, complete with images of the Sydney Olympic Mascots Syd the Platypus, Millie the Echidna and Olly the Kookaburra, was in excellent condition, but the finder's social media followers discouraged her from taking a bite. *Sunday Telegraph (Sydney), 4 Feb 2024.*

### SUPERHERO

In early April a masked man known only as cheeseballman427 announced on Instagram that at 3pm on 27 April he would stand in Union Square Park in New York and eat an entire jar of cheese balls. At the appointed time he turned up with a large jar of cheese balls and ate the lot, surrounded by a crowd who shouted "Lisan al Gaib!" (a *Dune* reference) as he did so. "I decided to do this because I thought New York City could use something like this. Cheese balls are funny and eating an entire jar in one is a difficult task, but not impossible" he explained. *nypost.com, 29 Apr 2024.*

MARTIN ROSS

# MACABRE DOLL

**An 18th century doll with a gruesome story in her petticoat sells at auction**

SPECIAL AUCTION SERVICES

**ABOVE**: This 18th century English doll with a petticoat containing a murder account sold at auction for £27,500.

At an auction of the 1000 dolls amassed by Austin Smith and his late partner Margaret Harkins the highest price, £27,500, was fetched by an 18th century doll wearing a newspaper petticoat under a smart yellow gown with a blue trim. For reasons unknown, the petticoat was made out of clippings from a broadsheet dating to 1740 and telling the tale of mother-and-daughter murderesses Elizabeth and Mary Branch of Taunton, who were convicted of beating to death a servant-girl, Jane Buttersworth. *Metro, 27 Feb 2024.*

# CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

## 300: SOCRATEASING

"The astronomer Schmidt, of the land of Socrates..." – Fort, *Books*, p427

(Primary Sources collected in John Ferguson's Open University manual (1970), the older, lesser ones best explored in the multi-authored *The Unknown Socrates* (2002). Amplitudinous translations (print/online) of Aristophanes's *Clouds*. As Ecclesiastes (12. 12) observed – no student ever disagreed – "Of the making of many books there is no end." Latest here relevant is Armand D'Angour's provocative *Socrates in Love* (2019).

Socrates to football fans means Brazilian wizard Socrates Brassileiro Sampaio de Souza Vieira de Oliveira. Some linkages with our man – one of Fort's 'thrice-accursed Greeks' – emerge. His main club was the Corinthians. Off the field, he was a qualified doctor and campaigner for democracy, also a celebrated drinker.

Ancient Corinth was a byword for wayward women. Plato advised his students to eschew Corinthian girlfriends. Socrates was a stonemason by trade, but famously dubbed his teaching method 'Midwifery' – Aristophanes (*Clouds* 135) called the results 'miscarriages'.

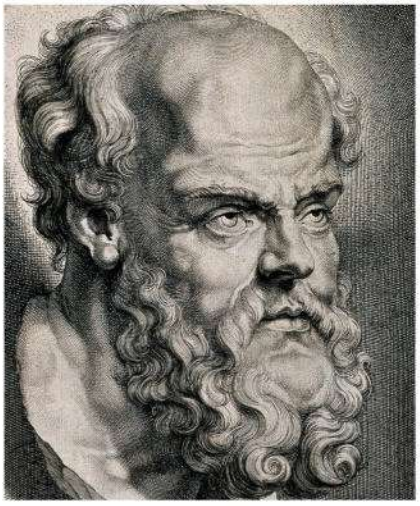
Quite right that in Monty Python's Philosophers Football Match Socrates should score the winning goal in last minute (diving header from cross by Archimedes (EUREKA!).

However, their Bruces were well wide in calling Socrates 'permanently pissed'. In Plato's *Symposium* (re-created as a 1965 TV playlet by Jonathan Miller – on YouTube), he drank Aristophanes and everybody else under the table and went off to a normal day's work, seemingly hangover-free (standard remedy in his time was a swig of vinegar sprinkled with flowers).

Our 'hair-of-the dog' is also germane, 'By the Dog' – sometimes expanded with 'of Egypt' – was Socrates's favourite oath.

Neither mason Socrates nor carpenter Christ wrote anything – they'd never have got university tenure and would be the despair of Research Assessment Exercises. Not the only thing they had in common; both were governmentally executed for their activities and ideas. Suggestively, double-headed busts of them were anciently popular.

Plato is his dominant memorialist. There's never-ending debate over how much of his Socrates is a genuine picture. The more down-to-earth Xenophon (often unfairly dismissed as 'simple') may be



more realistic. There are umpteen ancient mentions (Ferguson's repertoire ran to 335 pages). The other two singled out here are Aristophanes's head-in-the-Clouds burlesque and the much later anecdotal mini-biography by Diogenes Lærtius.

In Plato's *Apology*, representing the defence speech at his trial (399 BC), Socrates admits the play damaged him. This should not make us forget that at its competitive première (425 BC), it came last – what does that say about public opinion as sensed by its judges? What we have is the revised version complete with Aristophanes's rancour over the first failure. His public standing is enhanced by the claim that, during the Great Plague (and subsidiary ones) that afflicted Athens, he was the only person to escape infection.

Dæmons are Forever. Socrates frequently maintained that he was guided throughout life by his 'Dæmon' or guardian angel. There's predictable perpetual debate over whether to take this literally (visions) or figuratively. Socrates certainly endorsed (tongue-in-cheek?) the Delphic Oracle's verdict that he was the wisest of Greeks because he knew he knew nothing – shades of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*.

Disclosure time: I tend to think that Socrates in real life was not much more than a Greek windbag, glorified soap-box spouter. One story, in fact, describes how his maddened audiences would punch him and rip out clumps of hair – never saw this at Hyde Park Speaker's Corner.

When invited (the custom) to propose his trial punishment, Socrates suggested he be supported for life at public expense, thus infuriating the jurors to increase their vote for his execution.

His jury numbered 500 – could Henry Fonda have swung around all those Angry Men..?

Born c. 470 BC to a sculptor father and midwife mother, Socrates is credited with two wives, Xanthippe and Myrto. Consecutive or concurrent? – much ancient debate.

Xanthippe (='Yellow-Horse') was the more celebrated, chiefly because of her constant nagging – probably with good reason, this translating on occasion to drenching him with water and tearing his cloak off in public. Still, he bore this – how else? – philosophically. It may have been to avoid a scene that he sent her away from his death-cell drinking of the hemlock – a moment immortalised by the Greek rock band Socrates Drank the Konion (1971).

She may have regretted marrying the ugliest man in Athens, he being famous for his bulging eyes and pot-belly. There's a story that when the actor portraying him in the *Clouds* appeared, Socrates rose from his seat to proclaim the thespian's mask did not do his ugliness justice. However, his appearance did not stop ancient speculation over an affair with the handsome lecher-around-town Alcibiades or modern (D'Angour) that he had it off with Pericles's philosopher-mistress Aspasia. Xanthippe is deliciously re-imagined in Roger Scruton's fictional *Xanthippic Dialogues* (1993); also in Deborah Freeman's 1999 eponymous play.

Aristophanes depicts him as floating high above in a basket, Egg-Head boss of the *Phrontisterion* = our 'Think-Tank', whose curriculum featured teaching students how to make an unjust argument more effective than a just one – no shortage of this in modern universities. It ends with the Think-Tank being vandalised and burned by a student mob led by the leading one who felt he hadn't got value for money – prefiguring 1960s student protests.

Finale favourite. When told (Xenophon, *Memorabilia* bk3 ch11) that the courtesan Theodote had exceptionally beautiful breasts, Socrates insisted he must not rely on hearsay but see for himself. He discovered her posing for a picture, enjoyed the tit-show, persuaded her he was doing her a favour since tales of lecherous voyeurs would increase her mammary fame and mammon gain – nowadays, he'd have the Me-Too mob on him...

# ARCHÆOLOGY A MONTHLY EXCAVATION OF ODDITIES AND ANTIQUITIES

**PAUL SIEVEKING** examines pagan buckles, Celtic heads, fakes fossils and meteoric treasures

BBC

**ABOVE**: Bronze buckles showing a snake or dragon devouring a frog-like creature were analysed with X-ray fluorescence, scanning electron microscopy and other techniques. **ABOVE RIGHT**: A Celtic stone head with a "weird face" turned up on the BBC's *Antiques Roadshow*. **BELOW**: The famous *Tridentinosaurus* fossil is a fake.

## BUCKLE CULT

Four bronze belt ends depicting a snake devouring a frog – thought to be a symbol of creation and/or fertility – were recently discovered in Moravia, Bohemia, Bavaria, and Hungary. Because of their near-identical shape and materials, archæologists now believe that these belt ends are evidence of an unknown pagan cult with far-reaching and diverse populations across Europe in the early Middle Ages.

"When the belt with the motif of a snake devouring a frog was discovered with the help of metal detectors at the site near Břeclav in southern Moravia, we thought it was a rare find with a unique decoration," said lead researcher Jiří Macháček in a news release. "However, we later found that other nearly identical artefacts were also unearthed in Germany, Hungary and Bohemia."

Macháček's team conducted a thorough series of analyses to learn more about the buckles and their provenance, which they reported in the *Journal of Archæological Science*. Their work involved making high-tech scans and conducting a lead isotope analysis of the buckles to determine their composition, as well as three-dimensional scans to see how closely related the four buckles really were to one another. According to the analysis, not only were most of the buckles made from the same wax cast, but the copper used to make them came from the same metal ore in the Slovak Ore Mountains – one of the main suppliers for this material in Europe during the seventh and eighth centuries. The 3D models suggest that the buckles came from the same workshop.

> Its symbols show up in various artefacts across cultures in Europe at the time

Because of how widespread and similar the fittings are, the authors believe the belts were a way to communicate between classes and peoples. This theory upends a previously-held idea that this style of belt was only used by elites within the Avar ethnic group – a powerful group of people who conquered southeast central Europe in the sixth century and whose empire lasted some 200 years.

Iconographic analysis of the snake-eating-a-frog motif also revealed that its symbols are ones that show up in various artefacts across cultures in Europe at the time. For example, the snake appears on Avar artefacts symbolising creation and in Slavic mythology to mean coming from the earth. The frog, on the other hand, could represent a Slavic deity of fertility or a woman who has just given birth. "It was a universally comprehensible and important ideogram" said Macháček. *vice.com, 8 Jan 2024.*

## CELTIC STONE HEAD

A woman was left in shock when a hunk of stone with a "weird face" carved on it was valued by Adam Schoon on BBC TV's *Antiques Road Show* at £5,000. The unnamed individual unearthed the item whilst digging by the drains in her garden in Northern Ireland. Schoon believed the head was of Celtic origin. "I think to myself that here we are in Northern Ireland where the Celts existed and stone heads like this go back literally over 2,000 years," he said. "The style of this one, I think, is third century AD." *www.thesun.co.uk, 29 April 2024*.

## FAKE FOSSIL

A famous lizard-like fossil unearthed almost 100 years ago has turned out to be a fake. Discovered in the Italian Alps in 1931, it was believed to show the full body outline of *Tridentinosaurus antiquus*, 8in (20cm) long and 280 million years old, and was held up as a vital stepping stone in understanding the evolution of early reptiles. It was celebrated in many articles and books. Recently, researchers involved in a new study took a close look using UV photography and found that the fossilized 'skin' wasn't actually skin at all, but was composed of paint or charcoal. However, the fossil wasn't entirely fake. Some bones in the hindlimbs, as well as tiny bony scales called osteoderms, were found within the forgery. This means that, while poorly preserved, some parts of the

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fossil can perhaps be used for research and studies. However, most of the fossil is completely fake. Whether the imposture was done out of malice or if the researchers responsible simply wanted to highlight the fossil structure is unclear.

A paper on the discovery is available in *Paleontology*. *D.Mirror,* bgr.com, *17 Feb 2024.*

## METEORIC 'TREASURE'

A new analysis reveals that two artefacts from a dazzling Bronze Age hoard discovered in Spain were made from meteoric iron. The hoard, known as the Treasure of Villena and discovered by archæologists in 1963, in a gravel pit in the province of Alicante, encompasses a total of 59 bottles, bowls and pieces of jewellery exquisitely crafted from gold, silver, amber and iron. Researchers noticed a few curious details about some of the iron pieces. At the time, they described the items as being crafted of "a dark leaden metal. It is shiny in some areas, and covered with a ferrous-looking oxide that is mostly cracked." For the new study, researchers tested two of the iron pieces: a C-shaped bracelet and a hollow sphere topped with a gold sheet that may have once decorated a sword's pommel. Both items were crafted between 1400 and 1200 BC.

"The connection between gold and iron is important, as both elements have a great symbolic and social value," said study senior author Ignacio Montero Ruiz, a researcher at Spain's Institute of History. "In this case, [the artefacts] were… probably hidden treasure that could have belonged to a whole community and not to a single person. There were no kingdoms in the Iberian Peninsula at this historical period." Using mass spectrometry, a technique that measures the mass-to-charge ratio of molecules, they measured traces of iron-nickel alloy that were comparable to that found in meteoric iron. Given that the compositions of the artefacts are very similar, "both objects could [have] come from the same meteorite," Montero Ruiz said. "The iron technology is completely different to the copper-based metallurgy and to the noble metals [gold and silver]," he added. "So, people who started to work with meteoritic iron and later with terrestrial iron must [have had to] innovate and develop new technology."

The objects are both the first and the oldest meteoritic iron objects found in the Iberian Peninsula. The only known artefacts that include meteoric iron from the first millennium BC include an arrowhead from 900 BC found in Mörigen, Switzerland, and a few objects from Poland from around 800 BC. As for where the hoard's artefacts came from, that's still up in the air. "One option is [they] came from the eastern Mediterranean where other contemporary objects are known (for example, the dagger and other items from Tutankhamun's tomb)," Montero Ruiz said. *livescience.com, 7 Feb 2024.*

A gold-hilted dagger found in the tomb of King Tut surprised archæologists when they discovered that it was made of a material forged in outer space [see **FT344:16**.] Now, two new studies are painting conflicting pictures of the origins of the mysterious weapon. One of those studies on the dagger, made of iron from meteors, suggests it was manufactured in Anatolia (modern-day Turkey), while the other study indicates its Earthly origins are still a mystery. At the time King Tutankhamun reigned (1333 to 1323 BC), iron-smelting had yet to be invented, meaning the metal was a rare and precious commodity that often came from meteors.

In one of the studies, published in the journal *Meteoritics & Planetary Science* in February 2022, researchers describe how an adhesive used on the dagger's gold hilt was likely made of lime plaster, a material that was used in Anatolia at the time of Tutankhamun. This lime plaster, however, was not widely used in Egypt at that time. Additionally, historical records found at the site of Amarna, in Egypt, show that Tushratta, the king of Mitanni in Anatolia, gave at least one iron dagger to Tutankhamun's grandfather Amenhotep III (who reigned from about 1390 to 1352 BC). The team also found that the "iron blade was made by low-temperature heat forging at less than 950°C [1,742ºF]," since a mineral called troilite and formations of iron-nickel crystals known as 'widmanstätten patterns' could be seen on the dagger.

However, in another study, published in the book *Iron from Tutankhamun's Tomb* (American University in Cairo Press, 2022), researchers found that "it is currently impossible to arrive at a reliable conclusion as to the origin of Tutankhamun's iron objects or the craftsmen and materials involved." The authors noted that the "rock crystal" of the blade's pommel is similar to artefacts widely used in the Aegean area, while the pommel's "typically Egyptian shape suggests either manufacture in Egypt or foreign production for an Egyptian market. As a result, no clear overall picture on the origin of the dagger's handle and blade" can be made.

Albert Jambon, a researcher at the Sorbonne who has conducted extensive research on artefacts made of meteoric iron, was unconvinced by the findings that placed the manufacture of the dagger in Anatolia. He disputed the claim that the lime plaster was used as an adhesive. He noted that in the 1920s, limestone powder was used for the cleaning of some Tutankhamun artefacts and that the chemical tests used in the study detected this cleaning solution, not an adhesive. Additionally, "the hilt and the blade are two separate parts" and could have been manufactured in different places. *livescience, 24 Oct 2022*.

UNIVERSITY OF MILAN

EL MUSEO DE VILLENA

**TOP**: The gold-hilted dagger found in Tutankhamun's tomb of King Tut was found to contain meteoric materials, but controversy over the dagger's origin continues. **ABOVE**: The Villena hoard; two artefacts contained meteoric iron.

# Middle-aged Mulder: time to move on?

From a scientific viewpoint, says DAVID HAMBLING, paranormal research is now just a footnote

Matt Colborn's follow-up on 'Middle-aged Mulder Syndrome' (**FT:447:50-51**) called for a fuller consideration of how the field of parapsychology has evolved over the past 50 years, suggesting that cynicism was not justified.

Fifty years ago Uri Geller was a psychic superstar, a spoon-bending celebrity who unleashed a wave of belief that we could all learn to use our paranormal powers. Scientific testing failed to validate his claims. Geller fell back to being a more mainstream figure promoting the power of positive thinking rather than mind over matter.

As Colborn rightly notes, there was more going on than just Geller. Telepathy, precognition, telekinesis and remote viewing were all research hot topics back in the day. US and Soviet military establishments carried out large-scale paranormal research programmes. But not anymore.

To get an idea of how scientific thinking has changed, I compared papers mentioning 'Paranormal Research' recorded on Google Scholar for 1985-86 to 2015-16.

The 1980s haul pulled up 687 results showing serious mainstream scientific interest in the claims of parapsychology including "Investigating the Paranormal" in *Nature*, "Parapsychological research: A tutorial review and critical appraisal" in *The Proceedings of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers*, "The question of ESP in dreams" in *American Psychologist* and "Paranormal Experiences" in *The American Journal of Clinical Psychology*.

Fast forward 30 years to 2015-16 and there are over 9,000 hits. But the subject matter is very different. Top papers include "Paranormal beliefs and cognitive function: A systematic review and assessment" in *PLOS One*, "Believing is seeing: The link between paranormal beliefs and perceiving signal in noise" in *Consciousness and Cognition* and even "Substance Use On Campus: Exploring the Implications of Paranormal Beliefs" in *The American Journal of Criminal Justice*.

Science moved from exploring the paranormal to exploring why people believe in it, often in relation to mental health. In parallel we have "The uncanny place: A critical appraisal of popular paranormal TV shows" in T*he Journal of Popular Television* with "Understanding Consumer Enchantment via Paranormal Tourism." These show how televised ghost hunts and ghost tours had taken off as entertainment. People want to believe, and an industry grew up to satisfy that desire.

COURTESY URI GELLER

In 2015-16 there were still a handful of papers on actual parapsychology research, such as "Electromagnetic Field (EMF) Profile and Baselines at a Non-Haunted Control Location" in *The Journal of Scientific Exploration*. This relates to the showbiz aspect and the use of e-meters by ghosthunters, concluding "Results showed that a non-haunted control site had complex time-varying magnetic fields… similar to locations deemed to be anomalous."

Somewhere between these two dates, then, parapsychology lost credibility.

One of the most conspicuous fails was the US Project Stargate. Initiated in 1977, this $20m classified intelligence effort focused on remote viewing, employing psychic spies to peer behind the Iron Curtain and see into Russian military bases, find submarines and explore specific locations. It was terminated and declassified in 1995 with the conclusion that it had never produced useful information.

Colborn notes "very persistent statistical 'psi 'effects that do not seem to be the result of experimental error, flawed analysis or fraud," citing a notable 2018 meta-study by Professor Etzel Cardeña covering 750 studies (see **FT377:54-55**). Across very large-scale tests, for example guessing whether the next toss of a coin will be heads or tails, there are statistical anomalies. People *do* have a fractionally better chance of getting it right than would be expected, and this certainly merits research.

However, effects are frustratingly vague and hard to pin down. One of the most statistically successful experiments was performed by Prof Daryl Bem of Cornell University in 2012. Psychologists, like everyone else, know you remember a word better if you say it several times. Bem showed that this applies even if you only repeated the word *after you have been tested*. This implies a paranormal phenomenon. Bem's results seem statistically sound, even though they have proven hard to reproduce. But a statistical retroactive memory boost is not exactly a superpower (for more on Bem, see **FT270:4, FT274:56-58**).

This is why individuals like Geller are so important. Just one high-performing test subject who can consistently demonstrate paranormal talents would prove their existence. But, despite endless tests, no confirmed psychics have ever been found, though many frauds have been uncovered. After 19 self-proclaimed spirit mediums prove to be fake or self-deluded, how credible is the 20th?

Scientific paranormal research has retreated into a grey zone of prolonged experiments with barely-detectable effects. These have scientific value, but do not excite the public like table-rapping ghosts and psychic spoon bending. Worse, there is nothing to attract backers: remote viewing to find mineral deposits, precognitive stock market prediction and psychic spying, all potential applications 40 years ago, are off the table. Nobody has been able to apply parapsychology to make a profit.

Except in showbusiness. Non-scientific paranormal interest has soared, with 60% of the US population believing according to one survey. Shows like *Paranormal Caught on Camera* and *Ghost Hunters* promise thrills and chills in every episode. *Uncanny* is there to tell spooky stories. The audience wants in-your-face paranormal effects, not minor statistical anomalies. The audience gets them, but without too much critical thinking that might spoil the narrative.

Hence the current landscape of parapsychology: a paranormal media circus and psychologists looking at the belief systems behind it, with a trickle of genuine parapsychology research.

Matt Colborn believes it is possible to take an open, non-sceptical approach to fortean material. That is what good science does. And while some unexplained phenomena survive the process, some do not. Which is why the middle-aged will always see the popular illusions of their youth shattered and must move on.

The middle-aged Mulder is left clinging to the consolation prize of genuine if small effects which may still be valuable. But the dramatic telekinetic, telepathic, and pyrokinetic powers like those seen in *The X-Files* in the 1990s have departed from the realm of the possible.

# DANGEROUS BOOKS

Libraries around the world deal with difficult literary legacies, from aresenic-laced tomes to volumes bound in human skin

## TOXIC TEXTS

In Paris, staff at the Bibliotheque Nationale de France have been scouring their holdings of more than 16 million books for toxic volumes laced with arsenic. In the 19th century, British publishers frequently used arsenic compounds to create bright green pigments such as Paris Green, Emerald Green and Scheele's Green that were used on book covers. Handling bindings dyed with these pigments can be dangerous due to the poisonous nature of the chemicals, although a library spokesperson said that handling the books briefly would only cause minor harm. The Bibliotheque have based their search on a list of potentially hazardous titles put together by the Poison Book Project, run by researchers from the University of Delaware and Delaware's Winterthur Museum. Since 2019 they have tested hundreds of books for toxic heavy metals and drawn up a list of potentially dangerous titles. So far, the Bibliotheque has turned up four books from the list: the 1862-1863 book of the Royal Horticultural Society, two volumes of Edward Hayes's *The Ballads of Ireland* from 1855, and an 1856 bilingual anthology of Romanian poetry by Henry Stanley. "We have put these works in quarantine and an external laboratory will analyse them to evaluate how much arsenic is present in each volume," the library said. They plan to examine further books "beyond the Poison Book Project list". *BBC News, 25 April 2024.*

## ANTHROPODERMIC BIBLIOPEGY

Harvard University has also been tackling the difficult legacy of 19th century bookbinding practices. They have announced that they have removed the binding of a copy of *Des Destinées de l'Ame* (Destinies of the Soul) by Arsène Houssaye, held in the Houghton Library at the university since the 1930s, "due to the ethically fraught nature of the book's origins and subsequent history". The book, a meditation on the soul and life after death, had been given by the author to his friend Dr Ludovic Bouland, a doctor, who reportedly bound the book with skin from the body of an unclaimed female patient who had died of natural causes. "I had kept this piece of human skin taken from the back of a woman," he wrote. "A book about the human soul deserved to have a human covering," he explained, adding that no ornament had been stamped on the cover to "preserve its elegance." Analysis of the book in 2014 confirmed that the binding was indeed human skin and since then the library has been deciding what to do with it. It has concluded that "After careful study, stakeholder engagement, and consideration, Harvard Library and the Harvard Museum Collections Returns Committee concluded that the human remains used in the book's binding no longer belong in the Harvard Library collections." They say that they are looking at ways to ensure "the human remains will be given a respectful disposition that seeks to restore dignity to the woman whose skin was used" and that they will be "conducting additional biographical and provenance research into the anonymous female patient." Simon Chaplin, formerly head of the Wellcome Library in London, said, "There are not a huge number of these books out there; it has been an occasional practice mainly done for generating a sense of vicarious excitement than for a practical motive. It generally seems to have been done in the 19th century by doctors who had access to human bodies for dissection." The practice is known as anthropodermic bibliopegy and, as with the toxic books, it has spawned its own research project. This is The Anthropodermic Book Project, involving staff from Philadelphia's Mütter Museum and various universities across the US, which has been examining the 51 books known to be in public collections worldwide that are claimed to be bound in human skin. The best known of these are a notebook bound in the skin of William Burke, of Burke and Hare fame, held by the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, and an account of Maria Martens's famed *Murder in the Red Barn* bound in the murderer William Corder's skin by surgeon George Creed, on display in Moyses Hall Museum in Bury St Edmunds. To date, the project has tested 32 of the books and have confirmed that 18 are bound in human skin, with the remainder found to be bound in animal leather, including a 16th century volume once in Christopher Columbus's library that was said to be bound in "the skin of a Moorish prince", but actually turned out to be bound in pigskin. *BBC News, 28 Mar 2024, anthropodermicbooks.org.* For more on anthropodermic bibliopegy, see Christian Saunders, "Skin Games", **FT233:42-46**.

VINCENT DESJARDINS / FLICKR

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

*The skin came from the body of an unclaimed female patient*

**ABOVE**: The Bibliotheque Nationale de France has so far identified four toxic books in its collection. **BELOW**: A copy of Arsène Houssaye's *Des Destinées de l'Ame* bound in human skin taken by a doctor from "the back of a woman".

# Ignatius the phantom bellringer

**ALAN MURDIE** recalls one of the strangest ghost stories ever to appear in the British press

It is 75 years since the story of Ignatius the ghostly bellringer of Elm vicarage in Cambridgeshire caused a sensation in the national and regional press.

Between July and October 1949 leading British newspapers and magazines ran articles and features telling the tale of a phantom bellringer and his friendly relationship with Mrs Irene Bradshaw, the wife of the Rev Arnold Bradshaw, the vicar of Elm, a remote Fenland parish. It is one of the strangest post-War II British ghost stories. The events came to national attention after mention appeared in the Elm church magazine, with the vicar describing how he and his wife believed their 200-year-old vicarage and the village itself were haunted.

Soon after moving in, the couple repeatedly heard footsteps upstairs. These steps sounded near, from either the next room or the attic. Each time Rev Bradshaw – described as a level-headed individual who had recently served as an RAF chaplain – went to investigate, no cause was found. Then on one occasion the vicar and his wife were awakened by the sound of a slow-tolling bell. Mrs Bradshaw said she went on to hear it a further 31 times spread over the next few years. Every time, soon afterwards, the vicar learned of a death in the locality, requiring him to officiate at a funeral.

Meanwhile Irene Bradshaw encountered an apparition indoors. One winter's night, she was in the upstairs corridor when suddenly she found herself passing a monk wearing a dusty brown habit and sandals, so close that she brushed against him. "Be careful," he said.

The monk thereupon dissolved, but subsequently she saw him again many times. He appeared as a pale-complexioned man, aged about 33, with "dark, curly hair and thin ascetic features". After quietly saying to the figure "Bless You. Can I help you? Can you tell me your name?" she received the reply, "Ignatius the Bellringer".

Ignatius seemed to speak to her telepathically, with words forming in her mind. He said in life he belonged to a community of monks established on the site of the vicarage 750 years earlier. His duty was to keep watch for flooding and to warn his brother monks if there was any peril from rising water. But one day Ignatius fell asleep at his post, the waters rose swiftly and overwhelmed the community and many brothers drowned. Dying in disgrace, Ignatius remained earthbound, and penitent, now condemned to ring the bell whenever death approached in the village. That was why the ghostly bell Irene heard always heralded a funeral.

PA IMAGES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

**ABOVE**: The sun rises above All Saints Church in Elm, Cambridgeshire; according to the story, the sound of a slow-tolling phantom bell from the church would invariably portend the death of a parishioner.

## Dying in disgrace, the monk was condemned to ring the bell whenever death approached

Thereafter, Irene enjoyed further convivial conversations whenever Ignatius put in an appearance. He explained that his presence spanned the centuries, telling Irene, "To me there is no time, 100 years is like the fading of a rose." He recalled that in the past the smell of flowers was sweeter, the colours of butterfly wings brighter and the songs of the birds more beautiful. Of the afterlife, he said that Heaven was a beautiful place and all who repented could eventually expect to reach it. He declared the world of 1948 with all its materialism and lack of faith disturbed him. (What would he think now? one wonders.)

Once Irene asked him what he thought of radio, television and the atomic bomb. Ignatius replied, "Which one of you can make a rainbow?" and declared he did not understand their workings adding, "Radio and television suit this restless age… but the atomic bomb?" It seems he was appalled by the prospect.

After communicating, Ignatius faded away in stages – first his face, hands and feet and then his robe and lastly a cross he carried in his hands.

One September night, Irene slept alone in their guest room. Kik, the family dog, usually slept at the foot of her bed, but on this night he whimpered and repeatedly tried to get out of the room. Three times she took him back and the dog eventually settled. Awakening in the jet blackness of the Fenland night ("a night as black as black hogs" they used to say), Mrs

**ABOVE**: Elm vicarage seen in a photograph taken around 1890. **BELOW**: The story of Elm's phantom bellringer related in *Psychic News*, 9 July 1949.

Bradshaw immediately felt something tightening across her neck before it suddenly broke off. Switching on her torch, she discovered with immense relief that a tendril of wisteria had curled through the open window and lain across her throat. She pulled it away and was drifting back to sleep when suddenly "the bedclothes were flung to the floor, and I was picked up and thrown sideways across the bed."

Meanwhile Kik snarled, whined and fought something invisible. Terrified, Irene tried to scream but found herself paralysed. Her terror intensified as a black shape loomed above her and, through a haze, a pair of gnarled hands materialised and reached down to seize her throat. She saw a huge head with a ghastly red face above her as the hands increased their pressure and, powerless to defend herself, Irene felt her end had come. Then suddenly Ignatius appeared. He seized the strangling hands and pulled them away from her neck. As he drove off the phantom molester, Irene's power of movement was restored and she fled to the safety of her husband's bedroom. Marks remained visible on her neck for almost a week.

Ignatius later told Irene her attacker was the spirit of a man who was once murdered in the room and that his actions in saving her life had compensated for his lapse so many years before. He said his penance had been partially lifted and he hoped for complete forgiveness. His appearances dwindled and finally ceased altogether.

When The Bell Tolls . . .

TWENTY-FIVE times in the last two years the vicarage bell in the village of Elm, Wisbech, Cambs, has been mysteriously rung, and each time the death of a villager has been reported within a few hours.

Last week the bell tolled again, and the passing of a Mrs. Mitcham, a local resident, was soon reported.

Mrs. Irene Bradshaw, wife of the vicar, is the only person who hears the bell and has seen the bell-ringer. She claims he is a monk who died 700 years ago.

According to Mrs. Bradshaw, she first met the spirit in one of the corridors of the vicarage.

"I brushed against him and he said, 'Do be careful'," she told a "Sunday Pictorial" reporter. "I asked him who he was and he replied, 'Ignatius the Bellringer.'"

**Ignatius, who often visits Mrs. Bradshaw when she is sitting alone, is said to wear a monk's brown habit including sandals.**

"It was his job to ring the bell when there was danger of floods rising in the Fens. Once he fell asleep and did not ring the warning. Some monks were drowned and he was in disgrace," said Mrs. Bradshaw.

The vicar confirms his wife's testimony, saying, "I was inclined to laugh at first at what I thought was my wife's foolish imagination. But every time she has heard the bell I have been notified of a funeral."

After the Revd Bradshaw published a summary of these experiences in the parish magazine, they were picked up by the national press, generating a great deal of interest. This intensified after Irene told the *Sunday Pictorial* for 3 July 1949 of hearing the ominous bell tolling earlier that same week and that a Mrs Mitcham had died. The following week she reported the death knell sounding twice more, with two more parishioners passing away (*Psychic News*, 16 July 1949). The Revd Bradshaw stated: "I was inclined to laugh at first at what I thought was my wife's foolish imagination. But every time she has heard the bell I have been notified of a funeral."

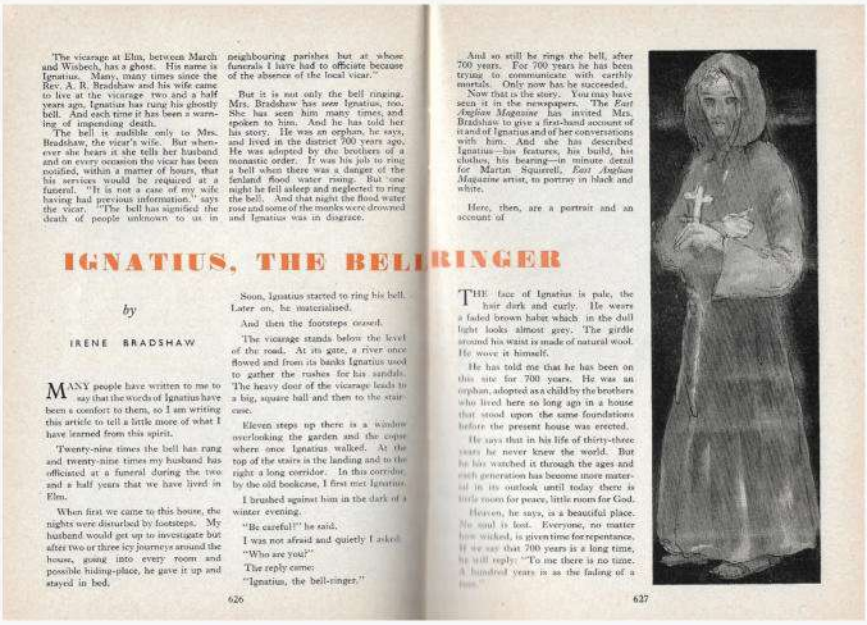
One can imagine this all sparking considerable consternation locally and exciting numerous worried discussions and anxious speculation over for whom the ghost bell might toll next.

The regional *East Anglian Magazine* then approached Irene to tell the story in her own words. Illustrated with an artist's impression of Ignatius, her article appeared in July 1949, revealing many people had written to her saying they were moved by the content of his messages. The story certainly polarised opinions, with several correspondents in its September edition vigorously querying her claims and highlighting the historical improbabilities and contradictions.

Ghost hunter Peter Underwood (1923-2014; obit. **FT323:28-29**) reports going to interview the Bradshaws at Elm. His first published account appeared in his *The Gazetteer of British Ghosts* (1971) with a second relaying much the same information in his autobiography, *No Common Task* (1983).

However, in 1996 when he published *Peter Underwood's Guide to Ghosts and Haunted Places* he produced an altogether more breathless account involving a vigil inside Elm vicarage: "It was just after 2am when I heard the footsteps. At first they were faint but as I listened they became louder. They seemed to be moving towards me along the upstairs corridor. Suddenly, the sounds came from only one place. They were as rhythmic as before but they were no longer approaching."

Underwood says he shone his torch down the corridor finding "it was deserted, yet the footsteps were as loud and as uninterrupted as ever." He continued: "Switching off my torch, I edged forward a few steps. Now the



The vicarage at Elm, between March and Wisbech, has a ghost. His name is Ignatius. Many, many times since the Rev. A. R. Bradshaw and his wife came to live at the vicarage two and a half years ago, Ignatius has rung his ghostly bell. And each time it has been a warning of impending death.

The bell is audible only to Mrs. Bradshaw, the vicar's wife. But wherever she hears it she tells her husband and on every occasion the vicar has been notified, within a matter of hours, that his services would be required at a funeral. "It is not a case of my wife having had previous information," says the vicar. "The bell has signified the death of people unknown to us in neighbouring parishes but at whose funerals I have had to officiate because of the absence of the local vicar."

But it is not only the bell ringing. Mrs. Bradshaw has seen Ignatius, too. She has seen him many times, and spoken to him. And he has told her his story. He was an orphan, he says, and lived in the district 700 years ago. He was adopted by the brothers of a monastic order. It was his job to ring a bell when there was a danger of the fenland flood water rising. But one night he fell asleep and neglected to ring the bell. And that night the flood water rose and some of the monks were drowned and Ignatius was in disgrace.

# IGNATIUS, THE BELL-RINGER

by

IRENE BRADSHAW

MANY people have written to me to say that the words of Ignatius have been a comfort to them, so I am writing this article to tell a little more of what I have learned from this spirit.

Twenty-nine times the bell has rung and twenty-nine times my husband has officiated at a funeral during the two and a half years that we have lived in Elm.

When first we came to this house, the nights were disturbed by footsteps. My husband would get up to investigate but after two or three icy journeys around the house, going into every room and possible hiding-place, he gave it up and stayed in bed.

Soon, Ignatius started to ring his bell. Later on, he materialised.

And then the footsteps ceased.

The vicarage stands below the level of the road. At its gate, a river once flowed and from its banks Ignatius used to gather the rushes for his sandals. The heavy door of the vicarage leads to a big, square hall and then to the staircase.

Eleven steps up there is a window overlooking the garden and the copse where once Ignatius walked. At the top of the stairs is the landing and to the right a long corridor. In this corridor, by the old bookcase, I first met Ignatius.

I brushed against him in the dark of a winter evening.

"Be careful!" he said.

I was not afraid and quietly I asked: "Who are you?"

The reply came:

"Ignatius, the bell-ringer."

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And so still he rings the bell, after 700 years. For 700 years he has been trying to communicate with earthly mortals. Only now has he succeeded.

Now that is the story. You may have seen it in the newspapers. The *East Anglian Magazine* has invited Mrs. Bradshaw to give a first-hand account of it and of Ignatius and of her conversations with him. And she has described Ignatius—his features, his build, his clothes, his bearing—in minute detail for Martin Squirrell, *East Anglian Magazine* artist, to portray in black and white.

Here, then, are a portrait and an account of



THE face of Ignatius is pale, the hair dark and curly. He wears a faded brown habit which in the dull light looks almost grey. The girdle around his waist is made of natural wool. He wove it himself.

He has told me that he has been on this site for 700 years. He was an orphan, adopted as a child by the brothers who lived here so long ago in a house that stood upon the same foundations before the present house was erected.

He says that in his life of thirty-three years he never knew the world. But he has watched it through the ages and each generation has become more material in its outlook until today there is little room for peace, little room for God.

Heaven, he says, is a beautiful place. No soul is lost. Everyone, no matter how wicked, is given time for repentance. If we say that 700 years is a long time, he will reply: "To me there is no time. A hundred years is as the fading of a

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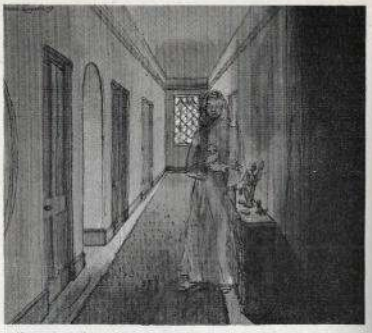

*'It was in the long corridor, by the old bookcase, that I first met Ignatius'*

Once I asked him what he thought of the so-called wonders of the age, what he thought of radio, television, the atom bomb. He answered me with a question: "Which one of you can make a rainbow?" And then he said: "Radio and television exist this restless age, but the atom bomb . . . . !" And he covered his face with his hands and muttered: "Man was not meant to destroy. Pray for the dead . . . prayer is a telephone between God and you. Pray and listen."

He will tell you, too, that in his day the flowers had a sweeter perfume, the butterflies had brighter wings and the birds had richer songs. And then he will fade away. First his face, hands and the bare feet in the rush sandals. Then the faded brown habit with its girdle. Lastly the cross in his hands . . .

IGNATIUS is not a frightening ghost. To me he has become a friend. In the winter when the evenings are long and I am alone, I can go up to the long corridor to see if Ignatius is there. And if he is I can talk to him, but, most of all, I can listen.

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I like to think that the old house is protected. And I like to sympathise with him when he tells me of the time when he slept and neglected to ring his bell and the floods, rising, carried away three of the brothers.

And it is nice to know that the next world will be such a happy one, better still that we shall have time to repent. Think what it means to the blind to be able to see, the moment they die, for the deaf to be able to hear, the dumb to speak. Ignatius says that the moment death comes we are filled with happiness, and it is then that our real work begins; that education and position do not matter, only love and kindness.

I hope Ignatius will not need to ring his bell for a long time, for this vicar, like all good shepherds, loves his flock, and I would sleep peacefully at night and dream of the world into which I have wandered with Ignatius.

Most vicarages are cold and austere, but when my husband and I first entered this one we remarked to each other upon its friendly atmosphere. Invisible hands seemed to stretch out to greet us. At once we seemed to be part of the house. All our furniture fitted into place. The dark corridors were passages of peace. Do you wonder that we love it and are happy in the possession of Ignatius, the ghostly monk of Elm Vicarage?

And we shall always be grateful to him for ringing his bell a few weeks ago at 2.45 a.m. to warn us that a water-tank was overflowing and that our new decorations were in danger of being spoilt.

Although many people want him 'laid', we hope that he will stay as long as we are here, though we hope some day he will, with us, rest in peace.

## The Month's Books

**Some Examples of English Handwriting**, prepared by Hilda E. P. Grieve (*Essex County Council, Chelmsford, 5s. 6d. post free*).

HERE is a most useful book for students of old manuscripts. It reproduces examples of handwriting from some of the documents at the Essex Record Office and gives detailed transcripts and translations with notes on the most usual methods of abbreviation. This is number six in the unique series of publications prepared by the Essex Record Office.

**Essex**, by Phoebe Fenwick Gaye (*Paul Elek, Ltd., 15s.*)

THOSE of us who remember Miss Gaye's previous writings (we our-selves pleasurably recall her *Week End Garden*) will be pleased to meet her again between the covers of her latest work. It follows *Norfolk* and *Suffolk* in the "Vision of England" series and in many ways excels them. The text matter is excellent, the photographs magnificent (though some of the captions are slip-shod and made Colchester a city and a statue a statute) and the drawings may perhaps be good though they fail to inspire us personally.

**The English Rural Labourer**, by G. E. Fussell (*Batchworth Press, Ltd., 12s. 6d.*)

MUCH has been written about the land-owning and merchant classes of the past four centuries, but com-

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sounds seemed to come from the room on my left."

On entering the room he saw nothing, yet the noises continued. "They seemed all round me in the very room I stood in and also at the same time in the room below and above me in the attic space… The footsteps I heard were not of this world."

Underwood even says he recorded noises successfully and on a later patrol, "I caught a glimpse of something at the other end of the corridor. Even as I peered I heard the rustle of a long garment and the hint of a tinkling bell and then all was quiet again and the corridor completely and utterly deserted."

What is curious is his omission of these startling details in his earlier works. Giving Underwood the benefit of the doubt, perhaps he had agreed to keep matters confidential for the Bradshaws; though his account of hearing the footsteps all around him (they sound like an infestation of poltergeist rappings) would surely vindicate a haunting, whatever one makes of 'Ignatius'. This same 1996 book contains several expansions and embellishments of other cases Underwood had previously published since 1971, leading to a feature about him, 'A Haunted Man' in the *Daily Mail* magazine for 28 September 1996.

Mary Greene, who interviewed Underwood, found him rather irritable and tetchy, snapping out brusque answers to her mildly sceptical questions as he recounted a number of ghosts which, as she put it, "he almost saw".

One may wonder if, in the intellectual loneliness of his twilight years, Underwood's imagination ran away with him in his own burst of automatic writing when it came to Elm.

Another fascinated by the Ignatius story was the gifted photographer, the late Sir Simon Marsden. He travelled to Elm vicarage in 1984 and learned the Bradshaws were long dead. An original print of his 1984 photo is now selling for £1,500.

Altogether, it is easy to come up with alternative scenarios to spiritual ones. There is no independent corroboration of the existence of Ignatius or of any monastery at Elm and Irene's stories could all be invented or imagined (the strangling ghost incident sounds like sleep paralysis stimulated by a tendril of creeper – 'wisteria triggering hysteria' one might say).

The unverified claim of over 30 deaths at Elm might also seem excessive, though it is conceivable. Perusal of the death notices and obituary columns in East Anglian newspapers of the period reveals people routinely dying in their early sixties, with the newly formed NHS arriving too late for many.

In 2009 historian and researcher Robert Halliday visited Elm to find the former vicarage property now a private home undergoing major conversion works. From locals he learnt the Bradshaws were still recalled, but concluded that with the march of time the precise facts will forever remain uncertain. Nor was there anything in historical records to support a monastery once standing at Elm.

Robert also pinpoints inconsistencies in Irene's story, for instance where Ignatius declares he struggles to comprehend modern technology, yet later compares prayer to a telephone line to God.

Culturally, the strange story of Ignatius emerged when stories of ghostly British monks returning and even communicating with the living were in fashion, including Frederick Bligh Bond (1867-1945) at Glastonbury (see **FT143:40-44**) and the Revd AF Webling of Risby, near Bury St Edmunds, who believed himself in touch with dead monks of St Edmund's Abbey. Ghostly monks, and possibly Miles Coverdale, the first translator of the Bible into English, contacted the Revd Fyne-Clinton via a medium at a séance held at the re-opened church of St Magnus in the City of London in 1951 (see *Some Unseen Power*, 1985, by Philip Paul).

**LEFT**: Irene Bradshow told the story of her encounters with Ignatius in this illustrated article for the *East Anglian Magazine* of July 1949.

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**ABOVE:** Photographer Simon Marsden visited Elm in 1984, capturing this typically atmospheric image of the vicarage.

Ignatius seems to have been one of the last of this pattern. His warnings about technological changes, post-war materialism and his harking back to an idealised old England "before the war" mirrored certain literary conceits in 1948 exemplified by writers such as George Orwell; in his *1984* an old man talking to Winston Smith recalls a richer sensory world, a time when "the coins were heavier, the beer was bitterer". Poet Robert Graves was similarly deploring "nowadays" in the introduction to his influential *The White Goddess* (1948). Perhaps Mrs Bradshaw felt and experienced this zeitgeist even more deeply.

Thereafter, it seems psychic and spiritual counselling from members of antique monastic orders switched dramatically both in faith and origin, turning away from Christianity and moving much further east, with pronouncements from both incarnate and discarnate monks, lamas, and gurus from different Asian countries. Notably, warnings about atomic energy also flowed from various aliens met by UFO contactees from the 1950s onwards.

And yet I wonder. Was Ignatius purely a whimsical fiction or some cultural

## The Revd AF Webling of Risby believed himself in touch with dead monks of St Edmund's Abbey

hallucination? Anyone studying mediumistic communications will notice the fragmented and muddled nature of many messages, the mixture of the plausible and the implausible with occasional flashes of startling accuracy, even if the identity of the supposed 'guides' remains questionable.

There is also the matter of hearing a ghostly bell warning of an imminent death. Interestingly, the portentous sounding of a phantom bell in Cambridgeshire is not without precedent. In 1845 a ghostly bell was said to have rung out in the village of Guilden Morden when a ship carrying 23 former villagers, all emigrants to Australia, foundered and sank, being heard at the same hour as the sinking, it was averred.

This experience is known elsewhere, with belief being particularly strong in the Swiss Alps, as discussed by Gotthilf Isler, a Jungian analyst, in an article published in the magazine *Psychological Perspectives* in 2021. Isler remarks cases of phantom bellringing in Alpine districts have declined in terms of perception and understanding, suggesting the loss of the ability to readily comprehend such signals. To previous generations a peal of bells might convey many meanings, (e.g. an expression of faith, a call to prayer, as warnings, announcing or commemorating a death, repelling of evil forces). Certain sensitives may still perceive these when reported today, but most people only experience feelings such as sadness they cannot explain, only to learn later of a death or a fire. Isler argues the phenomenon represents symbolic signals from the unconscious mind demonstrating its link with the environment at a deeper level of reality.

Sources: *Reynold's News*, 23 Oct 1949; 'Some Reflections on the Unus Mundus: The Totality of the World as an Inner Realization' by G Isler in *Psychological Perspectives*, 2021, vol 64 no. 4; *Cambridgeshire Customs & Folklore*, Enid Porter, 1969; Robert Halliday, personal communication.

# STRANGE CONTINENT

**ULRICH MAGIN** gathers the weird news from Europe, from weeping Madonnas to nightmare weather

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## DEADLY SKIES

At about 5pm on 20 May 2024, many people were enjoying the sunny weather on the banks of the River Elbe in Dresden, Germany, when a thunderstorm arrived, along with a lightning flash that injured 10 people, four of them severely. The spokesman for the Dresden fire department, Michael Klahre, told local TV that a 27-year-old man and a 30-year-old man had to be resuscitated after cardiac arrest. Three women and seven men between the ages of 26 and 41 were injured. When the firefighters arrived on the scene, as Klahre explained, "the situation was that four people were lying on the ground and two people no longer had any blood circulation." The department declared a "mass casualty incident" and 50 emergency services personnel were soon on site to care for the injured. They found a further six people complaining of typical symptoms after a lightning strike, for instance a tingling in the body. All 10 injured people were taken to hospital, while anyone who felt uneasy was also advised to go to hospital to be checked out.

According to lightning analysis by a weather forecast provider, around 8,000 amperes were measured at the location at the time of the impact; when you put your hands on a typical socket, you receive a shock of only 16 amperes. Police are now investigating exactly how the accident happened. Several thunderstorms hit parts of Saxony on this afternoon, yet no other damage was reported. In Germany, about 110 people are injured by lightning strikes each year. Weather expert Ralf Valencia said: "Lightning can sometimes span 15 kilometres [9.3] and can even strike where the sun is still shining." *mdr.de/nachrichten, 21 May 2024.*

Lightning is not the only dangerous but commonplace atmospheric phenomenon. You'd think modern technology would be bullet-proof against normal weather – and then a plane flies from Majorca to Vienna and is beheaded by a hail shower. On 9 June 2024, an Airbus A320 of Austrian Airlines was in the process of landing at Vienna Schwechat airport when the plane encountered a severe hailstorm at a height of 6,000m (20,000ft). The pilots said the storm had not shown up on their radar. The hailstones smashed into the cockpit window and tore off the nose of the plane. The pilots sent a mayday message but managed to land safely on the runway. The whole incident lasted only a few seconds, and the plane arrived only five minutes late. Neither of the pilots nor any of the 173 passengers was hurt – a small miracle in itself! *stern.de, 10 June 2024.*

LEFT: The Airbus A320 that flew into a hailstorm at 20,000ft.

*Neither of the pilots nor any of the passengers was hurt*

## THE BALTIC TRIANGLE?

Anyone who grew up in the 1970s probably first encountered forteana in one of the many books then published about the 'Bermuda Triangle'. One of the typical stories told was that of ships or aircraft becoming totally disoriented when their electronic gadgets went haywire. Now, over a period of several months since late 2023, satellite navigation over the Baltic has been seriously impeded.

"Since December 2023, disruptions to the navigation signals emitted by the satellite navigation system Global Positioning System (GPS) have been sporadically reported from the north-eastern area of German airspace," the German Ministry of Transport told the press in February 2024. The Federal Network Agency, which is responsible for protecting the electromagnetic spectrum, is being continuously informed and exchanges new developments with the military and airlines. Engineers were able to locate the origin of the disruptions, but they kept quiet about the results. The most likely explanation is not aliens, but Russians – it is said that such deliberate interruptions of the GPS network often increase at times of international tension.

Early in May 2024, Estonia directly accused Russia of being the culprit. At the end of the last week of April, two Finnair planes had to be diverted after GPS interference prevented them from landing in Estonia's second-largest city, Tartu, one of only a few airports in the region where a GPS connection is required for landing. The Finnish airline suspended its flights from Helsinki to Tartu until 31 May. The airline said it did not know where the disruption came from, yet similar problems had been noticed in the past near the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad and Finland's eastern border with Russia.

Estonia's Foreign Minister, Margus Tsahkna, blamed Russia for the problems. "We know that Russia has been jamming the GPS signal since the beginning of its aggression in Ukraine. In the last year and a half, this problem has become very serious in our region," he said on Estonian television. His services had located the origin of the disruptions – which also affect neighbouring Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, Sweden, Poland and Norway – in the regions of St Petersburg, Pskow and Kaliningrad. *tagesschau.de, 4 Feb, 2 May 2024.*

## SIGNS AND WONDERS

At times of crisis, the faithful look for celestial signs of redemption. I cannot say whether the number of miracles has increased recently, but stories of them seem to be back in the media.

In April 2024, reports appeared in many German newspapers that a miracle in Ostro in Saxony, Germany, had been explained. A statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus which had been brought from Medugorje made the news when eyewitnesses noticed a red substance on the heads of both figures in mid-March. "The phenomenon caused a considerable stir among the region's faithful. Footage spread on social media and in news reports and believers gathered to pray in front of the statue. The diocese

of Dresden-Meissen had the red stuff sampled and analysed by scientists. On 16 April the results were published. The red matter was an assembly of mites. Klaus Reinhardt, Professor of Applied Zoology at the Technical University of Dresden, explained that the phenomenon was due to typical arachnid behaviour. According to him, mites try to crawl to a higher point when temperatures rise. Determining the exact type of mite was only possible with further investigative effort, which is still ongoing. The diocese was satisfied with the results. "In the region there was interest in solving the phenomenon, especially on our social media channels," said diocesan spokesman Michael Baudisch. *web.de, Die Rheinpfalz, 18 Apr 2024.*

Meanwhile in Italy, a new visionary is attracting people – and money. Gisella Cardia (real name: Maria Giuseppe Scarpulla), a 53-year-old Sicilian, spreads her message in Trevignano Romano, near Lake Bracciano, Italy. She holds open air assemblies on a hill with a large statue depicting Mary in a light blue cloak, and Italian state television RAI was reporting on her movement almost daily in May of last year, interviewing experts, believers, and sceptics.

Cardia is a known criminal – the former entrepreneur has been convicted of bankruptcy fraud. Following this, she made a pilgrimage to Medugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2016 and found that a small statue of Our Lady she owned started to cry bloody tears. On her return she erected a large copy of it on the hill over Lake Bracciano and began to spread a message of doom (unless we all repent) that she received from the Virgin on the third day of every month. The large statue bleeds, while Cardia herself has the stigmata and an inscription on her forearm that is constantly renewed. Also, like Jesus, she can multiply food – in her case, pizza and gnocchi. Over the

**LEFT:** Gisella Cardia stands before the Trevignano Romano BVM. **BELOW LEFT:** The not-so-miraculous Ostro Madonna.

INDEPENDENT PHOTO AGENCY SRL / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

past year, the hill has become an attraction for spiritual seekers who have reported miraculous healings: "I've had crushed vertebræ since birth. Now I'm healed. I believe in it, I believe in Gisella," said one man.

However, with increased scrutiny, Cardia has come under suspicion. For one thing, news reports claim, a private eye had the Virgin's blood analysed and found that it came from a pig. Then her most outspoken supporter, 70-year-old Luigi Avella, who previously handed over more than 120,000 euros to her cause, now believes she is a fake. "I hope that the bishop will ask the faithful not to go up the hill," he said. The bishop, however, was being cautious, and still had Cardia and her claims under investigation – as did the public prosecutor. Perhaps this made the seeress nervous; an apparition scheduled for 3 April 2023 was cancelled, although the one on 3 May happened as planned. And Cardia admits of no doubt, no matter what worldly voices might say. She explained: "My faith makes me feel good because I have God and the Madonna on my side. In the past two months you've portrayed me as a monster. You said I was a fraud. You said I fled with millions of euros. But I'm here and here I'll stay." *br.de/nachrichten, 9 May 2023.*

She was certainly still active a year later when in March 2024, the *Times* reported on her activities, noting that the BVM's messages "showed a lack of theoretical knowledge unbefitting of the Virgin May." *Northern Earth 176, June 2024.*

This is hardly a rare case, as such visions and apparitions often express the ideas of strictly conservative Catholics. This has always been a dilemma for the Catholic Church, but now the Vatican has issued new *Norms for Proceeding in the Discernment of Alleged Supernatural Phenomena.* (see **FT446:4-5**). From now on there will no longer be any official confirmation from the Church that an alleged miracle is of supernatural origin. Instead, there will be a differentiated assessment in six categories, with no recognition of wonders, only a category for a miracle that appears to be an authentic intervention of the Holy Spirit, although Catholics are no longer required to believe in it. In addition, the Dicastery of Faith regulations establish a detailed procedure by which diocesan bishops should verify alleged miracles and prevent undue veneration and excesses of piety. The new norms replace the last version, from 1978. The Prefect of the Dicastery of the Faith, Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, explains the background to the new rules. Examples of possible supernatural events which will be categorised include "claimed apparitions, visions, internal or external suggestions, writings or messages, phenomena in connection with sacred images, psychophysical and other phenomena". However, the Church stresses that none of the phenomena should be construed to be a revelation – all that was to be revealed has already been said and done by Jesus. *katholisch.de, 17 May 2024.*

## 100 YEARS AGO

Most forteans know that strange aerial phenomena are nothing new. See this case, with a strange meteor and accompanying animal reactions, which was reported in September 1924 in Austria:

"A Magnificent Meteor. Windhag, Upper Austria.

On September 27th, at 10 o'clock in the evening, a meteor of a beauty that had not been seen here before, flew with great speed from Perakirchen over Windhag. The meteor had the appearance of a dragon emitting sparks. In front was a large fiery tuft with bright white balls, towards the back there was a long tail similar to a tapeworm, whose square bundles were of a bright red colour and towards its back were dark red. The whole area was lit up as bright as day for about 20 seconds. All the dogs began to bark." *Salzburger Chronik für Stadt und Land, 2 Oct 1924.*

# FORTEAN FOLLOW-UPS

More monoliths appear, goblin plague continues and the Omagh Hum gets a council cover-up

## MONOLITHOMANIA [FT444:6-7]

After a pause of a few years, the wave of mysterious monoliths that started during lockdown in 2020 seems to have resumed. The shiny Toblerone-like structure that appeared on a bluff above Hay-on-Wye in Wales in March has now been followed by another in the Nevada desert. This was spotted in rugged terrain on Gass Peak by police carrying out a search and rescue mission north of the Las Vegas Valley. They posted an image on social media (pictured at right) saying, "We see a lot of weird things… but check this out!" adding "HOW did it get up there??" The structure was highly mirrored and stood six foot four inches (1.9m) tall and police swiftly removed it saying, "This poses a danger to you and the environment." They added that the police department "discourages anyone from venturing off marked trails or leaving objects and items behind." However, this still did not give them any clue as to how it had got there. "It remains unknown how the item got to its location or who might be responsible." Meanwhile, at about the same time, another monolith reappeared in Des Moines, Indiana, in a rather more accessible location; next to the city's mural commemorating the 1947 Maury Island UFO incident, which occurred nearby (see **FT41:52-57, 147:37, 355:32-39**). This seemed to be the same monolith that popped up in the area – and then vanished – at various times in 2021 and 2022. It was also triangular, but black and inscribed with indecipherable symbols, and instead of removing it and issuing stern warnings, the city has embraced the object and is encouraging people to visit it. This monolith's origins are also unknown, with locals undecided as to whether it is a prank, an art installation or an extraterrestrial visitation, but visitors have taken to leaving offerings of doughnuts at its base in homage to the shape of the Maury Island UFO. *BBC News, 18 June; ap.com, 21 Jun; waterlandblog.com, 15 Jun 2024.*

LAS VEGAS METROPOLITAN POLICE DEPARTMENT

## NINJA BEARS [FT426:7]

The legendary "Ninja Bear" of Hokkaido, Japan, who subjected farmers to a reign of terror in which he attacked 66 cows, killing 32 of them, was finally shot and killed by a hunter in late 2023, with the bear's carcass apparently being sold to local restaurants. Known as Oso18 because he was first captured on camera in the Ososhibetsu district and left paw tracks 18cm (7.1in) across, he gained his fearsome reputation because he was extremely large for a Hokkaido bear, standing 7ft 3in (2.2m) tall, and evaded every attempt to trap or track him, allowing him to carry out his attacks with impunity. However, no sooner had locals celebrated the demise of the marauding beast than the attacks started again, with locals fearing a new wave of ninja bears who have learned from Oso18 and are developing a taste for human flesh. Not only did a huge bear smash its way into a cattle shed and eat all the cows inside, but three days later in Gunma province a couple in their 70s were seriously injured by a massive bear that smashed its way into their house in the middle of the night. The 74-year-old man had heard a noise outside and opened the outer door to his bedroom, allowing the animal to burst in and attack him and his 72-year-old wife. Then, days later in Akita province, a 64-year-old man was killed by a bear while working on his farm. In the last 12 months, 219 people have been attacked by bears in Japan in 198 separate incidents, mostly on Hokkaido, with six people dying. Yasushi Fujimoto, head of a hunting organisation, said: "The mountain is turning into a restaurant for bears, because of the remains left after hunting," and believes that this is giving the bears a taste for flesh, making the usually omnivorous animals almost completely carnivorous and leading them to trespass on farms to attack cattle and people to satiate their appetites. A government officer on Hokkaido said, "I have seen about 40 bears myself. Bears are everywhere. Even if you set off firecrackers right next to them, they won't run away. They just prowl around." *thesun.co.uk, 3 June 2024.*

## ZIMBABWE GOBLINS [FT444:4-5]

The plague of goblins in Zimbabwe seems to be continuing unabated. In the latest incident officers have abandoned the Gwambe police base in Bulilima, Matabeleland South, because goblins were terrorising them at night. Local councillor Mabed Ngulani explained: "We built a police station for the officers, and initially, they patrolled in pairs, however, they haven't been able to stay for extended periods." It seems that the male officers were being remorselessly besieged by female goblins every night. "They described being harassed – bodies being violated, doors opening on their own, and things climbing on the roof – making it impossible to sleep," Ngulani said. As a result, "the police from Plumtree withdrew the officers from Gwambe, stating they wouldn't endanger them further," he explained. In the

**ABOVE:** Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant, India – buzzed by unidentified aerial lights.

meantime, the police are going to use the local clinic as an office until the infestation at the police base subsides. *thezimbabwean.co, 4 Jun 2024.*

### OMAGH HUM [FT442:21]

The Fermanagh and Omagh District Council investigation into the persistent and intrusive hum that has been plaguing the town has concluded with the source being identified and apparently silenced, although exactly what it was has not been made public. John Boyle, the council's director of community and wellbeing, explained, "We were able to hone in on a specific spot, and undertook a targeted screening exercise with a number of industrial businesses using equipment on a 24-hour basis," adding, "However, a particular premises became the focus, and environmental health officers engaged with the management." The result, though, seems uncertain, if not downright baffling, as Boyle admitted, "While nothing was absolutely concluded, the noise did cease in a sense, but we will keep the complaint open and under review over the next number of months." He also said that unless there "are formal, public legal proceedings, we would not be naming the source of that noise." Locals were not impressed, with one saying "Of course" they should tell people where the noise was coming from... Why would they keep it secret?" *BBC News, 13 June 2024.*

### BUZZED NUCLEAR PLANTS [FT416:18-19]

Following repeated incursions into the airspace over US nuclear and military facilities by UFOs and/or drones, India has reported the same thing happening over its nuclear installations. Indian Police Service investigator Syed Abdul Kader filmed more than 10 unidentified aerial lights flying in zigzag patterns over the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant in Tamil Nadu in July 2023. He filmed lights making aerodynamically impossible manœuvres and can be heard on his video saying, "The way it's moving, this could never be an airplane." Kaser also reported drone-like objects hovering above the nearby Indian Space Research Organization's (ISRO) Propulsion Complex, which tests cryogenically stored rocket fuel for India's space programme. At the same time, others were making similar sightings on India's Neelankarai-Mahabalipuram coast, near Chennai, and the Madras Atomic Power Station (MAPS) in Kalpakkam, where they were photographed by former Director General of Police Prateep V Philip. As in the US incursions, it has proved impossible to capture the objects generating the lights, or locate any operators, although research shows that they were definitely not misperceived planets or stars, as none were in the right place during the sightings. *dailymail.co.uk, 28 Mar 2024.*

# MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

## 282: NO IT SNOT

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

### The myth

The colour of your catarrh is a diagnostic tool. If the contents of your tissue are green, you need antibiotics. Clear means you're suffering from an allergy, but at least you haven't got a cold or flu, while either green or yellow show that you are still infectious and should stay at home.

### The "truth"

Medical authorities are pretty clear on this: the colour of mucus is not particularly informative. For one thing, nasal discharge triggered by allergies, where no infection at all is involved, can be of any colour or consistency. If you don't clear your nose all night, the morning discharge is likely to be a deeper colour simply because it is older – nothing to do with whether it's caused by a virus or a bacterium. With a common cold, phlegm and snot will go through a sequence of colours according to the stage of the infection, not its cause. Colds are in fact most catching at the "clear" stage, not the highly coloured *"urrrgh"* stage.

### Sources

www.health.harvard.edu/blog/dont-judge-your-mucus-by-its-color-201602089129; https://theconversation.com/health-check-does-green-mucus-mean-youre-infectious-and-need-antibiotics-63193; www.gov.uk/government/news/green-phlegm-and-snot-not-always-a-sign-of-an-infection-needing-antibiotics

### Disclaimer

Wrong? Then please blow your nose in our general direction, by means of the letters column.

### Lightning lore

This column has covered various matters relating to lightning over the years, but one myth we've not bothered with, because nobody believes it any more, is "Lightning never strikes in the same place twice". It does, of course; frequently. That didn't stop elections expert John Curtice, ahead of the UK's recent general election, promising the nation that "There is more chance of lightning striking twice in the same place, and a bit more, than Rishi Sunak remaining as Prime Minister". Pedantically correct, of course. Still, while Prof Curtice may know a lot about psephology (for those unfamiliar with the term, this is the science of explaining why opinion polls are always wrong), for heaven's sake don't take his advice on where to shelter during a storm.

# CRYPTOTERRESTRIALS GO LEGIT

## Academia explores alien intelligences on Earth

FOX NEWS MEDIA

**ABOVE:** Professor Michael Masters explains the concept of cryptoterrestrials to a sceptical-looking Jesse Watters on Fox News.

In recent years, as "UFO" has morphed into "UAP", the subject of ufology has gathered a tenuous degree of Establishment acceptance, with Harvard astronomer Avi Loeb searching for alien technosignatures (**FT404:14, 425:6, 444:24**) and the US Congress holding high-profile hearings on strange things seen in the skies (**FT434:28-29, 436:28-31**). Now, in a further step, Tim Lomas, Brendan Case and Michael P Masters, from Harvard University's Human Flourishing Program, which researches the factors that contribute to human well-being, have gone full fortean on the subject. They have put out a paper titled The Cryptoterrestrial Hypothesis: A Case for Scientific Openness to a Concealed Earthly Explanation for Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena, saying that their idea "deserves genuine consideration in a spirit of epistemic humility and openness", something Charles Fort would have welcomed. This might have been a little premature though; almost as soon as the paper, which has not yet been peer-reviewed, went up as a pre-print on the ResearchGate website, it was taken down again, although it is still possible to view it via the Internet Archive (https://tinyurl.com/bdffdkrh).

*UAPs may reflect the activities of intelligent beings concealed here on Earth*

In their paper, Lomas, Case and Masters attempt to take a fresh look at UAPs, starting from the observation that these are increasingly being understood as operating under the sea as well as in the air. They suggest that they are not extraterrestrials, but rather some form of intelligence that has been existing alongside us while keeping itself hidden – cryptoterrestrials. They say, "There is also… an unconventional terrestrial explanation, outside the prevailing consensus view of the universe. This is the ultraterrestrial hypothesis, which includes as a subset the 'cryptoterrestrial' hypothesis, namely the notion that UAPs may reflect the activities of intelligent beings concealed in stealth here on Earth (e.g., underground), and/or its near environs (e.g., the Moon), and/or even 'walking among us' (e.g., passing as humans)." The authors review the history of the concept, which is not a new one, going back at least to the Reverend Robert Kirk's *Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* from 1691, and having its latest manifestation in the recent controversial testimony of military 'UAP whistleblower' David Grusch (**FT434:28-29, 436:28-31**). Reviewing the evidence, Lomas, Case and Masters conclude that while cryptoterrestrials remain a less credible source for UAPs than extraterrestrials, they are still worth considering. As a result, they have come up with four potential versions of the 'Cryptoterrestrial Hypothesis' (CTH) that they feel should be considered, in descending degree of likelihood:

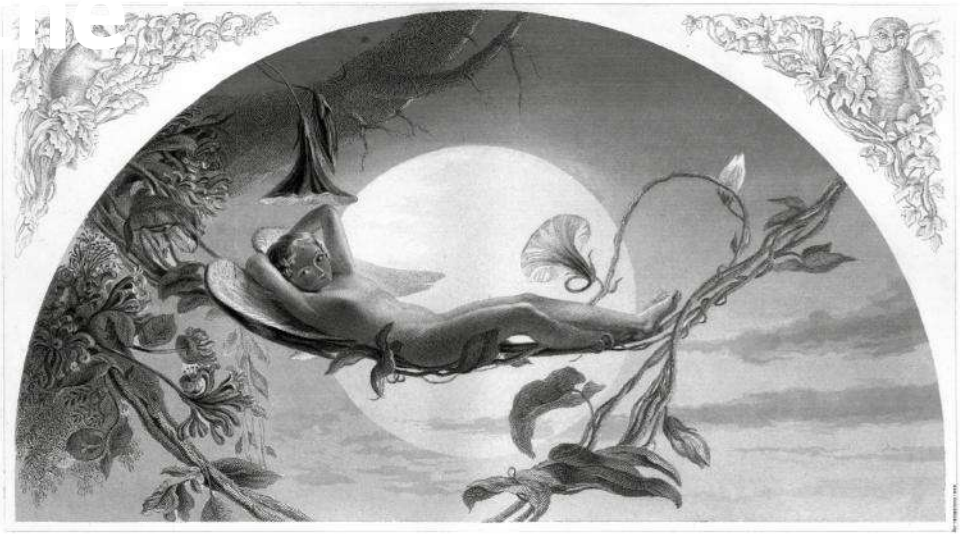
- CTH1: Human cryptoterrestrials. A technologically advanced ancient human civilisation that was largely destroyed long ago (e.g., by flood), but continued to exist in remnant form.
- CTH2: Hominid or theropod cryptoterrestrials. A technologically advanced non-human civilisation consisting of some terrestrial animal which evolved to live in stealth (e.g., underground), perhaps a hominid, or alternatively a species much more distantly related to us (e.g., descendants of unknown, intelligent dinosaurs).
- CTH3: Former extraterrestrial or 'extra-tempestrial' cryptoterrestrials. Extraterrestrial aliens or our intertemporal (time travelling) descendants who "arrived" on Earth from elsewhere in the cosmos or from the human future, respectively, and concealed themselves in stealth.
- CTH4: Magical cryptoterrestrials. Entities which are less like homegrown aliens and more like earthbound angels, relating to the world inhabited by humans in ways that (at least from our present perspective) are less technological than magical, who are known in European languages by names like fairies, nymphs, elves etc.

It is not entirely surprising, then, that an academic pre-print server pulled the paper; few scientific papers can get away with rationally proposing that the existence of fairies is worth serious consideration, and it is pretty startling to see respected academics even broaching the possibility. Also, while commendably open minded and fortean in its approach to the topic, the paper has issues of credibility that might worry many. There is relatively little in the way of critical consideration of its sources. For example, Grusch's testimony to Congress is taken at face value and the authors make much of this being given under oath, despite warning signs that it might not be all that it seems; Grusch has frequently cited known hoaxed cases as real, and while non-UAP 'whistleblowers', such as Edward Snowden, produce reams of documentary evidence,

Grusch has only presented carefully curated hearsay. Also, if he is part of an intelligence disinformation exercise, his testimony under oath would not put him at risk of a perjury prosecution as he would have been lying on behalf of the authorities who would also be responsible for his prosecution. Lomas, Case and Masters also take on board claims of ancient lost civilisations with barely a nod to any critiques of the hypothesis. They cite the Yonaguni structures off Japan (**FT114:40-43, 132:66**) as likely evidence, speaking approvingly of a Joe Rogan podcast about them, while being very offhand about geologists who think they are natural stratigraphy; similar weaknesses are repeated throughout the paper. Whatever your views of such opinions, it is clear why many might consider that they are not meeting appropriate academic standards for journal publication.

While it is refreshing to see researchers from the heart of academia being willing to address fortean subject matter in an open-minded and speculative way, in this case they might have been better served by having a more secure grasp of the nuances of the field and the varying degrees of credibility in which the various players are held. Nonetheless, their conclusions hold. It remains possible that if UAPs are a genuine manifestation of non-human intelligence, cryptoterrestrials are a valid option for its identity, and Lomas, Case and Masters's analysis of their potential forms is a reasonable one. However, seasoned ufologists will be aware that it does not really add much to conclusions drawn more than 50 years ago by the likes of Jacques Vallee and John Keel.

*The cryptoterrestrial hypothesis: A case for scientific openness to a concealed earthly explanation for Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena, Tim Lomas, Brendan Case and Michael P. Masters, ResearchGate.net, 22 April; newsweek.com, 13 Jun 2024.*



# Fairies, Folklore and Forteana

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

## THE VANISHING DINER

It is my favourite *FT* article. First published in far-off 1993 [**FT69:34-35**] it tells how the author, Tony Clark, had, in 1956, a bizarre experience while returning to Tehran from a project in Manjil. Clark and his Iranian colleague, both hungry, stumbled upon a small restaurant in a remote village, the settlement marked by a distinctive pile of rocks. The establishment, run by an Armenian man and his White Russian wife, offered an exquisite meal. Clark savoured a series of delectable dishes, including cold cucumber soup, dolmas, and chelo kebab, all very cheaply. The proprietor and his wife provided impeccable service, creating an almost dreamlike atmosphere. Impressed, Clark shared the story with friends in Tehran, who dismissed it as an impossibility. Three months later, Clark returned to the village, dragging along a sceptical English colleague. To his bewilderment, the restaurant had vanished without a trace. A local insisted that no such place had been there in his time.

> THE RESTAURANT HAD VANISHED WITHOUT A TRACE. A LOCAL INSISTED THAT NO SUCH PLACE HAD BEEN THERE...

This tale might sound unique but, in fact, it is common in the English-speaking world: I call it the Vanishing Diner. Stranger finds a place to eat, often in difficult circumstances; has, against expectations, an amazing meal; returns and discovers that the eating place does not, in fact, exist. Sometimes the place is a bistro in central London, sometimes tea rooms in Devon, sometimes a diner in Texas; one was a cafe in Donegal, and there are a number of pub versions from (of all places) the Isle of Wight. I love the story because it recreates the most perfect sensual experience known to our species, not sex or sauna or sleep, but an exceptionally good meal, the kind we'll have five or six times in our life. Then it emphasises our inability to recapture the experience. Whether the event is a fiction, a misunderstanding or a miracle, the narrative is satisfying.

Forteans have tended to explain Clark's story and others like it as 'time slips'; moments when someone quite unexpectedly returns 2,000 or 10 years into the past. The most famous example of a time-slip – in some ways the foundation stone of a new anomalous category – is the Moberly-Jourdain incident when two women claimed to have returned, in 1901 at Versailles, to the time of Marie Antoinette [**FT278:30-35**]. The Vanishing Diner has something of this: much is made of the fact that the restaurant is old and the bill cheap. But I wonder whether its genealogy is not to be found in fairy and glamour. The traveller visits the fairy castle, eats, dances and loves and wakes up in an empty field in the morning covered in dew...

**Simon has just brought out (with Davide Ermacora) *The Exeter Companion to Fairies, Nereids, Trolls and other Social Supernatural Beings: European Traditions*.**

# Disclosure imminent?

**NIGEL WATSON** looks at high-profile UFO 'whistleblower' Luis Elizondo and his fantastic claims.

Luis Elizondo has been the most prominent promoter of UFO disclosure since 2017 and he promises big things for 2024. The publicity for his new book states: "The stakes could not be higher. Imminent is a first-hand, revelatory account inside the Pentagon's most closely guarded secret and a call to action to confront humanity's greatest existential questions."

Avi Loeb, Director of the Institute for Theory and Computation at Harvard University and Head of the Galileo Project, gives some background to Elizondo's emergence as a UFO pundit:

"After resigning from his service as director of the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program (AATIP), the secretive Pentagon unit that studied Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs), Luis 'Lue' Elizondo disclosed the existence of this programme. Prior to that, he was a senior counterintelligence officer for the Department of Defense, and operated throughout Afghanistan, the Middle East and Latin America.

"The question of whether the US Government is in possession of information or materials that originated from an extraterrestrial technological origin, remains unresolved. As of now, there is no indisputable evidence in support of that.

"Whistleblower or eyewitness testimonies are insufficient to make a clear scientific case. Data on what lies outside the Solar System is not a matter of national security and should be disclosed to the scientific community..."

Jack Brewer, a volunteer and writer at the non-profit Expanding Frontiers Research, agrees that no indisputable evidence has been given, because in his opinion, "Luis Elizondo has been repeatedly shown to be an unreliable narrator... regardless of what one might choose to believe about his often inaccurate statements that sensationalise UAP. The impact of To The Stars is undeniable, but the jury is still out on whether the group's effective public relations campaign was grounded in anything more than advancing a variety of unclear agendas.

"Given we are now seven years out from a largely inaccurate *New York Times* article, it is reasonable to suppose that if any information existed that could persuade a discerning proverbial jury, it would have long since been published. I do not envision Mr Elizondo's forthcoming book and claims will be significantly different than his previous unreliable and incorrect claims, or from most of the material found in the overstocked library of self-described UFO researchers, witnesses, and whistleblowers, in that the buyer should beware. Attention should always be given to what a claimant factually demonstrates as compared to what they simply want taken on faith. That is never more so than when they purport that their work is science-based. Show me, don't tell me."

EVERETT COLLECTION INC / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

**ABOVE**: Luis Elizondo, appearing in *Unidentified: Inside America's UFO Investigation*. **FACING PAGE**: Elizondo's new book promises further revelations.

## Whistleblowers claim their security oaths prevent them from telling all they know

AATIP is a sideline project that emerged from and is frequently confused with the Advanced Aerospace Weapon Systems Applications Program (AAWSAP); the latter's objectives were to study "potential breakthrough technology applications employed in future aerospace weapon systems" and "to understand the physics and engineering of these applications as they apply to the foreign threat out to the far term, i.e., from now through the year 2050."

In their essay "On the AAWSAP-AATIP Confusion", dated 30 June 2024, VJ Ballester-Olmos and Luis Cayetano provide a detailed chronology of US Government UAP programmes and 'disclosure'-related milestones that dates from 1996, and note:

"AAWSAP and AATIP were one and the same program, with 'AATIP' a mere nickname to throw the Pentagon off the program's tail because of the DoD (Department of Defense) suspicions about its true nature (UFOs and Skinwalker Ranch phenomena), and a name retained by Luis Elizondo from which to draw succour and pursue his own follow-up, unfunded endeavour."

It is certain that Elizondo joined Tom DeLonge's To The Stars Academy (now rebranded as To The Stars) in late 2017 and they released the three US Navy videos nicknamed "GoFast," "Gimbal" and "FLIR." The resulting worldwide publicity made Luis a UFO media star.

He also claimed that the US Government is in possession of exotic materials and that we should: "Imagine a technology that can do 6-to-700 g-forces, that can fly at 13,000 miles an hour, that can evade radar and that can fly through air and water and possibly space. And oh, by the way, has no obvious signs of propulsion, no wings, no control surfaces and yet still can defy the natural effects of Earth's gravity. That's precisely what we're seeing."

When pressed on providing evidence about official US UFO research, he and subsequent ex-government whistleblowers have claimed their security oaths prevent them from telling all they know.

Danny Taylor, on the MUFON (Mutual UFO Network) Global's Facebook page notes:

"Whatever the truth behind his exit from the US Government, he clearly has had access to some interesting information on the subject – especially by association with Mellon, Putoff, Semivan, Lacatski, etc. I agree though that this constant threat narrative he pushes is off-putting. If we really were in as much danger as he suggests, then doing podcasts, books and TV shows is hardly going to address that. If he knows there's a huge threat from visitors then say what it is – oath be damned. The constant hiding behind security oaths and patriotism is just self-defeating about any information he tries to relay."

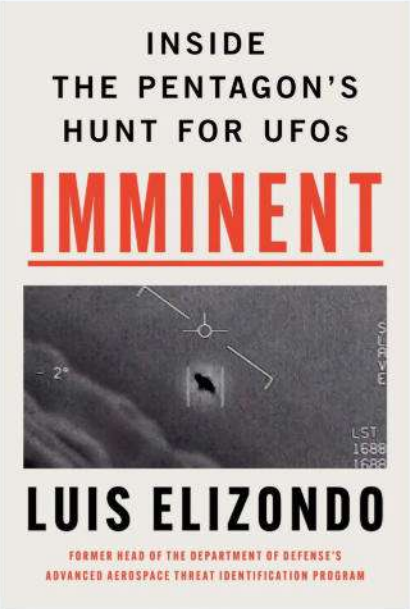
Veteran US ufologist Martin Kottmeyer points out that Elizondo follows the pattern of many UFO researchers and ufologists before him of promising disclosure... sometime soon: "May 27, 2018. At the UFO Congress in Porto Alegre, Brazil, responding to a question of whether we are close to understanding how UFOs work, Luis Elizondo, described as former director of UAP research at the Pentagon, asserts, 'Yes. Yup. We are really, really close. In fact, I would submit to you I don't think we are thousands of years or even centuries away. I think, based on my experience, we might be 20 years out. It's no longer a theoretical question of if it's possible. We have already demonstrated the physics with the CERN Large Hadron Collider and some of these other places. We know absolutely some of the physics is not only possible, we are replicating it. We're replicating it though at a very small scale... It's a scaleability issue.'

"Seemingly [he is] alluding to the God particle as a relevant touchstone to interstellar drives. Twenty years out is a familiar number from predictions of when we will be having fusion reactors on the power grid. That's probably been given every decade since the 1970s."

Rather than the 20 year prediction, last 13 October 2023, Elizondo posted this promise on X: "Howdy folks, just a quick update for you to consider... please know that ongoing efforts are underway that will reveal themselves by early to mid 2024. At the risk of haters trying to sabotage our efforts, I can't be precise at this time. But if you have learned anything over the last five years, I never make empty promises. Trust me, this will be worth it."

Many others have expressed their exasperation with Elizondo and his ilk online. On the MUFON Global, Facebook page, Bman409, asked: "How many years does it take? Like, let's say it started in 2017 with *NY Times* articles so, we're like seven years in and what have we got beside those videos? Not a damn thing..."

Another poster commented: "He doesn't know anything. He was pushed out of his job. Now doing the UFO circuit to earn a living. I've always seen him as the government shill. Government bought and paid for. Still pushes the security threat nonsense."




Cygnusb on Reddit put it more succinctly: "Yeah, right. I've been waiting for 'Big things coming' since 1993 *(X-Files*). Kicking the can..."

Another Redditor, Kathleen Slater, is more sympatetic: "The wheels of justice turn slowly. We're talking about a cover-up here concerning the biggest revelation known to mankind, involving a number of secret and compartmentalised intelligence programs running over eight decades or more. Shadow governments. Deep state fuckery. It's incredibly complex, mysterious and confusing, and it's littered with scandals and controversies. The whiny little nihilists that sit here and comment endlessly on every thread about how fed up they are with having to wait clearly have absolutely no idea how the world actually works. It ain't like the movies."

On Facebook, André Skondras took a similar line: "It's unfounded to dismiss whistleblowers as a 'complete waste of time' without considering their legitimate reasons for distrusting AARO [the US DoD's All-Domain Anomaly Resolution Office]. Whistleblowers often come forward because they believe important information is being mishandled or suppressed. The assertion that "they have no place else to go" if they don't trust AARO overlooks other oversight mechanisms, such as congressional committees or independent investigators. Instead of repeatedly demanding evidence, perhaps he [Elizondo?] should start investigating the whistleblowers' claims and searching for evidence himself. However, he lacks the necessary security clearances and need-to-know access to do so."

Lately Elizondo has revealed he and fellow UAP whistleblowers are under threat from persons or organisations unknown. He stated: "I would like to make this perfectly clear to the American people. I am not prone to accidents. I am not suicidal. I am not abusing drugs. I am not engaged in any illicit activities. If something happens to me or my family members in the future, you will know what happened."

He made similar claims exactly three years ago. On that occasion, he said a small group of individuals in the Defense Department lied about him publicly, attacked him and were conspiring to cover up the facts about UAP. Adding: "They use coordinated disinformation campaigns designed to squash this subject and discredit my colleagues and myself."

Greg Eghigian, Professor of History and Bioethics at Penn State University, told me: "We historians are a jaded bunch. It has to be said that we've been hearing pronouncements from self-proclaimed UFO experts that disclosure is imminent since at least 1950. In 1998, Martin Kottmeyer unearthed more than 200 such announcements. But alas, the smoking gun – or, in the case of UFOs, the captured alien material – has always been found wanting.

"So, for me, I look at books like Luis Elizondo's narratively, as fitting into a particular genre. Revelations of this sort have tended to follow a familiar script, and given Elizondo's public persona, I suppose there's little reason to expect much deviation from it. I suspect we will be presented with stories of remarkable phenomena, salt-of-the-earth witnesses, dismissive bosses, and heroic informants, stories that will aim at eliciting our sense of sympathy and outrage. Disclosure narratives, after all, are always framed as exposés about injustice.

"Will he be providing any new information? Perhaps. But he has spoken out on this subject so much over the years, it's hard to see what that might look like."

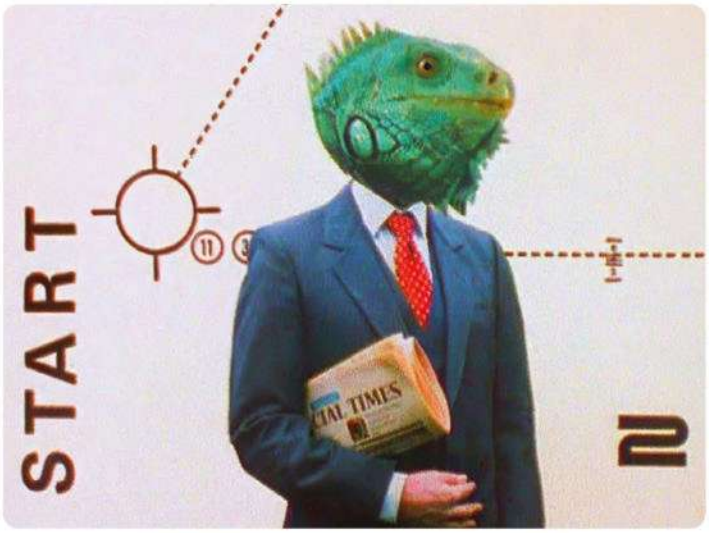
The San Antonio Aerial Phenomena Research Organization on Facebook is equally sceptical and describes how the disclosure narrative operates:

"A whistleblower steps forward, promising groundbreaking information that could reshape our understanding of the Universe. Conferences are held, media outlets become abuzz with excitement, and the UFO community braces for what seems like the imminent disclosure they have been desperately waiting for, yet when pressed for details, the response is invariably shrouded in secrecy. The 'just believe me' line happens over and over again... promises of something monumental keep the public engaged and hopeful, but the tangible proof continues to remain just out of reach. Each time this occurs it is discrediting and damaging to the field itself. Constant fighting and bickering start on social media... and the cycle continues and we get nowhere.

"Until a mass amount of people come together and stop giving all the air in the room to the people who are making these claims without proof and until the general public stops supporting and following these people on social media by the hundreds of thousands, this behaviour will never end and we may be stuck chasing our tails. Let us stop pussyfooting around others who dangle a non-existent reward in front of us and just call a spade a spade."

# FORTEAN TV REVISITED

In January 1997, Channel 4 viewers were treated to a television version of *Fortean Times* in which **REV LIONEL FANTHORPE** presented "a celebration of the miraculous, the mysterious and the downright weird". Join **RYAN SHIRLOW** as he begins his survey of *Fortean TV*...




**LEFT:** The sinister lizard-headed businessman from the show's titles: note the other *FT*. **BELOW:** Our man Fanthorpe astride his trusty Harley Davidson.

Perhaps it was my fault for evoking his name at Weird Weekend North 2023 (**FT432:14-15**), or projecting his leather-clad image on to the wall behind me during the musical conclusion to my talk on Arthur C Clarke. The science fiction author's two classic television series, *Mysterious World* (**FT410:32-39, 411:42-47, 412:44-49**) and *Strange Powers* (**FT432:32-39, 433:42-49, 434:42-49**), may have captured the imagination of the young forteans of the 1980s, but I had also wanted to pay homage to a later, very different hero.

"And as luck would have it", the Reverend Lionel Fanthorpe's *Fortean TV* was duly reissued on Network DVD.[1] Beneath the outlandish titles – a lizard-headed businessman, a young woman devouring a tarantula – the jaunty musical theme [2] signified a certain lightness of touch, a departure from the air of gravity and rational exploration that Clarke brought to television's forays into forteana. Among the visual collage of archive footage, cartoons, off-kilter camera angles and sweeping extreme close-ups, we meet our new host.

And so here I am, delighted to invite you all along again for an episode-by-episode analysis, looking for the common threads and highlighting how the approach to forteana had evolved by the 1990s. Climb on to the motorcycle pillion and hold on tight as we tackle the first five episodes of Series One!

**AMONG THE COLLAGE OF ARCHIVE FOOTAGE, CARTOONS AND OFF-KILTER CAMERAWORK, WE MEET OUR HOST**

## EPISODE ONE

Fanthorpe welcomes us, instantly cutting a more avuncular figure in front of the camera than Clarke ever did. Introducing himself as 'Father Lionel',[3] he reminds us that the biblical mysteries and miracles he preaches about in his day job should encourage us to keep an open mind.

After being briefly introduced to Fort and the concept of forteana, we are thrown straight into the deep end with David Heppell, the "world's leading authority on mermaids".[4] We get all the usual tall tales of fishermen, and the usual explanations of seals and seacows. But then it gets interesting, and in a way that demonstrates how *Fortean TV* wanted to push the envelope from the onset.

Apparently "some Scottish families claim mermaid ancestry," which Heppell ties to a high incidence of abnormal birth defects in fishing communities, and children born with their leg bones fused together (sirenomelia).[5] Today's science attributes this phenomenon to poisons accumulating in a fish-based diet,[6] yet other experts still extol the benefits of fish in pregnancy.[7] Fort would have been delighted by the learned men at loggerheads.

Next some Victorian freakshow taxidermy – "the females tend to be

hairier and uglier than the males" – and a "brutal" mermaid autopsy that reveals an assemblage of wood and wire, perhaps fashioned by that archæological/anthropological standby, the "fertility cult".

Nevertheless, sightings continue, with the most recent one cited here coming from a security guard in Queensland. Nowadays, we are more likely to get viral hoaxes on social media than earnestly reported mermaid sightings.[8]

A substantial mystery that is never addressed is how the programme managed to get 'viewers' to write-in to its very first episode. We start with a letter from French teacher John Knifton, who witnessed straw falling vertically from a clear blue sky, over Sheringham, in Norfolk (see **FT83:54**).[9] His eight-year-old old daughter Lauren picks up on the lack of interest from the nearby bystanders as almost equally bizarre. Fanthorpe uses the letter to take us on a quick history of sky falls, including frogs and fish, and the "whirlwind" pseudo-explanation that so greatly annoyed Fort.[10]

It is fascinating to see what titillated a late-Nineties audience, such as our next feature on tiny surgeon fish nibbling skin in a health-spa in the Anatoly Mountains. Readers may recall the mania for these in every shopping centre in the UK about 12 years ago, and how they disappeared overnight following tenuous scare stories about hepatitis and HIV.[11]

As it's the Nineties we also get some mad millennial nonsense, including an image of the Virgin Mary in discoloured glass so poor I didn't even bother taking a screenshot. Fanthorpe warns us that there have been "over 20 cases of holy aubergines in the last five years", with prophetic messages from Allah written in their seeds (see **FT55:4-5**).[12] In Nashville, Tennessee, a cinnamon bun bears scant resemblance to Mother Theresa (see **FT97:08**).

This is an action-packed debut, so we even find a few minutes for El Chupacabras. Puerto Rican experts fail to trace the mysterious goatsucker and the army is called in to manage a panic-stricken population. Suspicions turn to genetic experiments being conducted at the island's US military base, while others tie the attacks to a wave of UFO sightings.[13] The meme spreads throughout the Spanish and Portuguese speaking world, with the monster co-opted as a "cult icon" to promote festivals, T-shirts and CDs (see **FT89:34-38**).

To conclude, Fanthorpe sings us out on the mermaids, accompanied by his recurring friend Alf, to the tune of "My Darling Clementine".

## EPISODE TWO

The second episode starts with a bilocating Fanthorpe, quoting Fort: "I cannot say that truth is stranger than fiction, because I have never had the acquaintance of either."[14]

We are treated to a long item on Emily the cow, an abattoir fugitive from

**TOP:** Mermaids feature in episode one, from alluring maidens to voluptuous sea cows and constructions of wood and wire. **CENTRE:** Holy aubergines with the name of Allah spelled out in their seeds. **ABOVE:** was this goat a victim of El Chupacabras?

**TOP:** How now does this sacred cow sport a map of India upon its brow? **CENTRE:** The Swedish monster of lake Storsjon; the local museum houses a "probable embryo". **ABOVE:** Holly patiently awaits psychic intervention for her poorly knees.

**THE FAMILY OF MR LIN YU-ZHONG CAN STICK ALL SORTS OF HOUSEHOLD OBJECTS TO THEIR BODIES**

Hopkinton, Massachusetts. This escaped heifer is adopted by the Randi family, and the local Hindu community become convinced by a vaguely shaped map of India on her forehead that she is a messenger from the gods.

A statue to Gandhi is duly erected at the site, and priests from as far away as Cambodia arrive to pay homage. The whole thing is a fascinating study in credulous hysteria. Emily died in March 2003, but you can read more about her and the Randis on their dedicated website.[15]

More suspiciously early 'viewers' write in to claim that a 100-year-old monk stalks the Berwyn Hills near the A5 in Wales. Naturally, they chase after him, and later in the pub hear the legend of a local priest who ran off with the farmer's daughter.

Next up is a very short section on sea and lake monsters. Cornwall's Morgawr gets mentioned in passing,[16] then there's a little more on the Ostersund lake monster in Sweden. The photos are not very convincing. The Scandinavian beast was imprisoned for 1,000 years under a carefully placed runestone, but accidentally released when the inscription was translated in 1820.[17] As with other notable lake monsters (i.e. Ogopogo, as covered in *Mysterious World*) the local government has now forbidden any further 'hunting'. A museum holds a "probable embryo" from 1895, but tests are, of course, "inconclusive".

Then we're on to another topic familiar to *Strange Powers* viewers: psychic vets. Ann Wilson, a former magistrate, is an animal therapist and pendulum dowser; she soothes an aggressive Irish wolfhound by renaming him Egremont. This section has not aged particularly well due to an 'honourable mention' for convicted pædophile wobble-boarder, then Animal Hospital star, Rolf Harris.

Finally we hear that SLIders (people who experience 'Street Light Interference'; see **FT273:52-55**) are one of Britain's "fastest growing telepathic trends". I have experienced this non-phenomenon myself many times, which I attribute to coincidence and flickering bulbs. In the interest of balance, Anthony Ginn believes the removal of a large birthmark electrically charged the top of his head, and that this triggered his abilities.

Fanthorpe plays us out with his "Ballad of a Swedish Lake Monster". If you want to

play spot the recycled tune look away now. (It's Oirish favourite "Molly Malone".)

## EPISODE THREE

Lionel starts by having his already perfectly smooth head meticulously re-shaved. Then Hitler's hair comes back to life in Madame Tussauds, London. Theories abound; have bacteria inside the Führer's waxwork somehow reanimated his – gasp – *German* wig? After a couple of trimmings, it seems to settle down. Oddly, Hitler was one of the very few original figures to have survived the wartime bombing of Tussauds. The somewhat tasteless simulacrum was eventually removed in 2015, [18] but his Berlin counterpart has been decapitated.[19]

To Taiwan and the "magnetic" family of Mr Lin Yu-Zhong, who can stick all sorts of household objects to their bodies. Experts confirm no actual magnetic field is involved, but a possible link to adhesive perspiration also draws a blank. The potential science is discussed in an online article.[20]

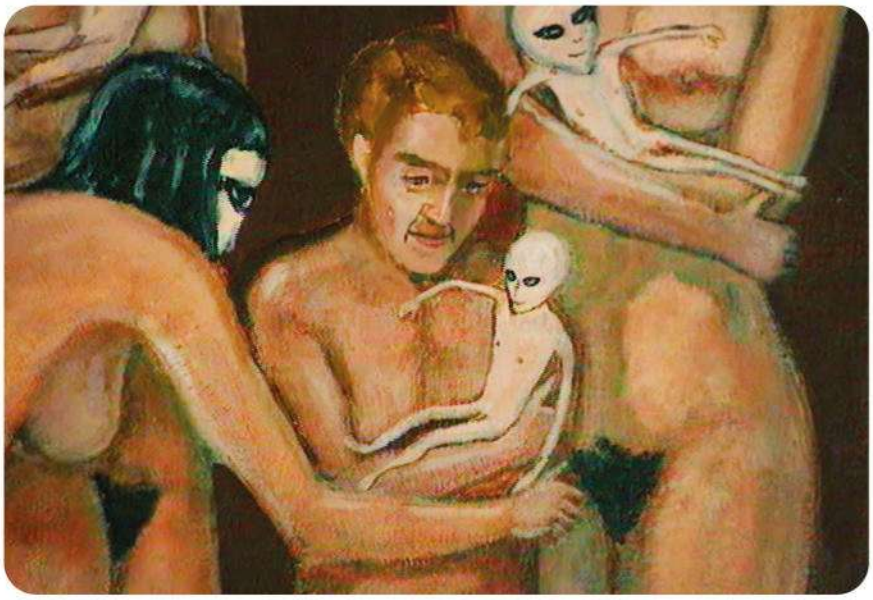
Two amateur metal detectorists write in, having discovered a Roman cavalry brooch in a field outside Little Wenlock. They hear galloping hooves, and a mysterious shadowy obstruction blocks their retreat (see **FT90:52**). For some reason Fanthorpe opines glibly about Einstein and Hawking and energies capable of bending time. But the obvious parallel not made here is with Harry Martindale's vision of legionnaires in a York basement (also covered in my *Strange Powers* write-up; see also **FT364:18-20, 365:16-18**).

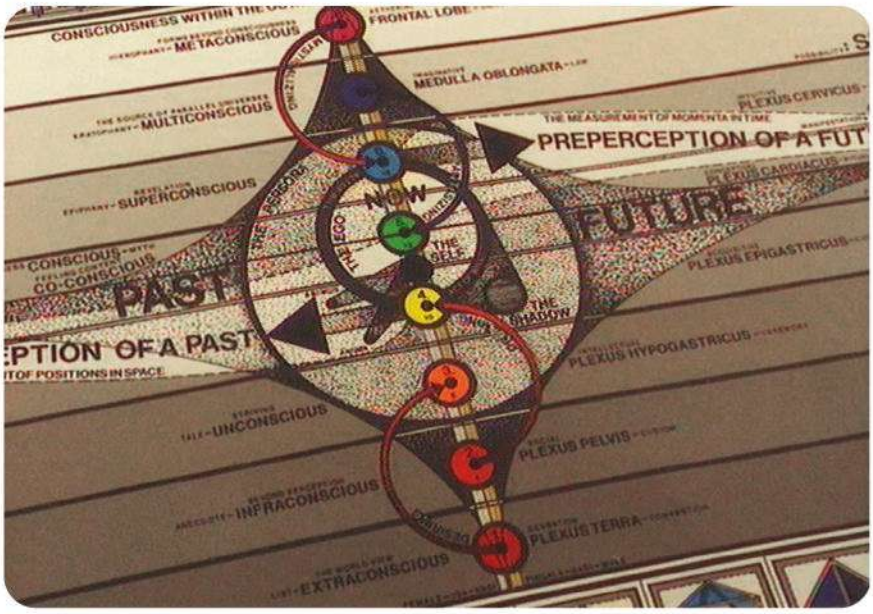
The second half of the programme is dedicated to the recovery of a sunken 'Egyptian city' in the desert 150 miles (240km) north of Los Angeles. Silent movie maestro Cecil B DeMille left clues in his autobiography that he had hurriedly buried 500 tons of sets and props after filming his 1923 epic masterpiece *The Ten Commandments* (see **FT63:29, 365:10**). Failing to raise enough money to continue his dig, Peter Brosnan has to rebury much of what he has uncovered. In a happier post-script, at least some of the site, including one of the giant sphinxes, was properly excavated in 2014.[21]

The concluding section focuses upon 'fertility magic', and a pregnancy boom affecting 14 staff over five months at Till 13 in the Halifax branch of Asda (see **FT88:20, 91:15**). The whimsical Professor Ronald Hutton explains the power of suggestion and ties it to a recent promotional drive, with Asda supermarkets setting their 'prices into stone' at the entrance, much like sacred sites did in pagan times. Llandudno's Till 11 develops similar powers, which then spread to a chair in the staff room. (My wife tells me there was a similar chair when she worked at Kirkstall Health centre in Leeds.)

But Widnes Till 15 wins the cup, claiming a grand total of 30 pregnancies. Locals link this arbitrary statistical cluster [22] to a young expectant mother who allegedly drowned

**TOP:** A waxwork Hitler's hair starts growing in Madame Tussaud's in London. **CENTRE:** Taiwanese father Lin Yu-Zhong, the paterfamilias of a whole 'magnetic' family. **ABOVE:** The hastily buried set of Cecil B DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*.





**TOP:** An example of the work of David Huggins depicting his complex relationship with alien women. **CENTRE:** Abductee art by Boston architect Paul Laffoley. **ABOVE:** Lionel goes in search of the so-called Nanteos cup, one contender for the Holy Grail.

nearby. Her ghost pushes staff, moves teddy bears and throws knives in the bakery, although she later morphs into an old lady wearing black. Lionel sings us out on this topic. (It's "She'll Be Coming Round the Mountain".)

## EPISODE FOUR

The phenomenon of alien abduction dates back to ancient tales of angels and demons, Fanthorpe assures us, but today we're focusing on the abductee's creative output. Wall Street professional David Huggins has vividly depicted his lifelong experience of… ahem… "physical contact" with alien women on canvas. A terrifying gimp with a hairy "knob" on the back of his head commanded David to impregnate these extraterrestrial females. Huggins is still painting, and was the subject of the recent documentary *Love and Saucers*.[23] Allegedly the aliens approve of all this publicity.

Meanwhile, Paul Laffoley is an architect from Boston who uses the "implants in his brain" to produce complex diagrams only he understands (they look a bit like the work of some Satanic management consultancy). He modestly compares himself to Leonardo da Vinci and suspects his latest invention could be a time machine. He's still going, although his official site now seems to soft-pedal the implant stuff.[24]

The next section, on the medical use of maggots, is again interesting only so far as it highlights how something once thought strange has become entirely commonplace. My wife uses them regularly as a nurse specialising in the treatment of chronic wounds. The tiny larvæ eat the dead and infected tissue cleanly and painlessly.[25]

Giant and misshapen vegetables follow. Malcolm Radford plays them hymns every Sunday morning, but he stops short of talking to them, unlike his friend Jimmy. Enterprising Israeli agriculturalists have allegedly engineered a new hybrid fruit, but I note that these acidic 'apple-bananas' are actually just an alternate variety.[26] Trevor and Violet Charles of Tiverton, Devon, similarly claim to have crossed strawberries and tomatoes in their vegetable patch. This tall tale reoccurred almost word for word on the opposite side of the Atlantic in 2010, and the explanation given is that it's just an unfamiliar species of tomato.[27]

This week's letter is from Harry Bloomfield of Barnsley, who believes his dog reappeared from beyond the grave in WH Smith… which leads us seamlessly to the Holy Grail.

Through his work as a priest, Fanthorpe heard stories about a cup, held by British aristocrats for generations, with amazing healing powers. Bishop Manchester, from the Church of the Holy Grail,[28] believes its rediscovery would herald the second coming of Christ. Legend has it the cup was brought to England by Joseph of Arimathea, and kept it secretly at

**FANTHORPE REMINDS US THAT CATS WERE TREATED AS GODS BY THE ANCIENT EGYPTIANS**

Glastonbury Abbey until its destruction by Henry VIII. Fleeing monks took it to Wales, where it ended up with the owners of Nanteos Mansion (see **FT319:20, 331:23, 345:53**). The cup was lost when the family line ended, but a Reverend Griffiths (who charmingly appears singing Jerusalem) follows a mysterious trail of coincidence that leads him to the current guardian – kept secret by the programme – who, much like the A-Team, will offer water from the cup to anyone who finds her and asks. After some excitement when it was stolen,[29] this almost certainly mediæval cup now resides in the National Library of Wales.[30] Of course, Fanthorpe sings us out with the "Holy Grail Song" (to the logical musical accompaniment of "Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polka Dot Bikini".)

## EPISODE FIVE

The first half of this episode is dominated by a feature that stayed with me for years. It's about linguist Alexandra Sellers, who claimed to have rediscovered the ancient language of cats. You can't give cats orders, she explains to one of her pupils, as it's

**TOP:** In episode five Lionel meets linguist Alexandra Sellers (above) who claimed to have rediscovered the lost language of cats. Was it a brilliantly observed spoof?

**TOP:** A bot-fly larva emerges from the head of Sheffield man Lee Miller. **CENTRE:** Is this weird green blob evidence of alien life, or the return of the Messiah? **ABOVE:** Each episode concluded with a song from Lionel and his recurring musical accomplice Alf.

"grammatically impossible".

Fanthorpe reminds us that cats were treated as gods by the Egyptians, although perhaps we need Barry Baldwin to unpick his claim that Plato was mentored by the animals.

Alexandra's 'Legend of Brau and Agh' is so wonderfully observed, I have reproduced it below in its entirety:

*"One night when Brau was sleeping, his sister, Agh, stole his testicles. In the morning she said, "Brau, I have found some tasty delicacies." Brau was hungry and ate them up. After his meal, Brau realised he had no testicles left. He laughed and said to Agh, "That is an excellent trick."*

Sellers is a prolific author, copies of her *Spoken Cat* and *How to Speak Cat* are still available online, with contemporary reviews in Britain and the US describing it as an extremely well-observed spoof.

Meanwhile, lorry driver Michael Reynolds survives a motorway pile-up and becomes the most metal filled man in Britain. He can no longer wear a watch, and his arms become an effective analogue TV aerial (I thought everyone could play this old trick).[31]

Professor Dov Weissberg [32] has the world's biggest collection of bullets, knives, coins and cucumbers removed from his patient's rectums, a regular tabloid staple.[33] In Sheffield, Lee Miller has a South American bot fly maggot trapped in his scalp.

After a reading from the Book of Ezekiel – the bit about the 'chariot' descending from the heavens – Uri Geller crops up to speculate on the enduring relationship between aliens and the Holy Land. A strange rock that melts ice and an unidentified yellow powder add to the mystery. Astrological predictions of imminent arrival from outer space are greeted by a mysterious green blob on a farm in Galilee. A canny Geller stops short of endorsement, admitting it "smelt like plasticine". Tests in Britain revealed it to be a lizard, of earthly origin, releasing Geller from a promise to buy the decomposing lump of filth for $1million.

Fanthorpe sings us out with the "Israeli Alien Song" and I'm afraid this is the first one where I can't place the tune; I'm sure *FT* readers can help. The lyrics nicely reference the Kabbalist Zohar and the idea that Earth is only one of many worlds.[34]

## TO BE CONTINUED...

And that takes us to roughly the halfway point of the first series. Despite covering some of the same ground as Clarke, it all feels very different, doesn't it? There isn't the same attempt to explain, to debunk or to apply any of Clarke's arbitrary scoring mechanisms to the data. It's all just accepted, presented for what it is, as part of the rich strangeness of human existence – and that strikes me as a much more fortean approach, even if I did give short shrift to some of the more fanciful content.

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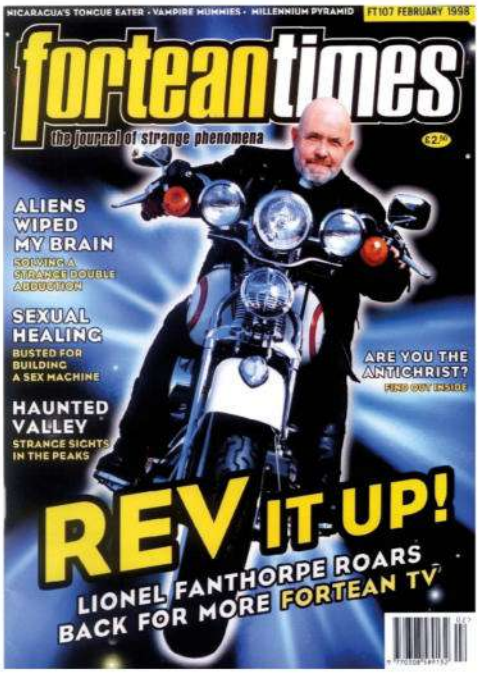

NICARAGUA'S TONGUE EATER · VAMPIRE MUMMIES · MILLENNIUM PYRAMID
FT107 FEBRUARY 1998
forteantimes
the journal of strange phenomena
ALIENS WIPED MY BRAIN
SOLVING A STRANGE DOUBLE ABDUCTION
SEXUAL HEALING
BUSTED FOR BUILDING A SEX MACHINE
HAUNTED VALLEY
STRANGE SIGHTS IN THE PEAKS
ARE YOU THE ANTICHRIST?
FIND OUT INSIDE
REV IT UP!
LIONEL FANTHORPE ROARS BACK FOR MORE FORTEAN TV

**ABOVE:** Lionel Fanthorpe in a publicity shot for *Fortean TV* and on the cover of FT107 to launch the second series of the programme in 1998.

Join me next time for Part Two, when we will wrap up the rest of the episodes and ask ourselves: does Lionel Fanthorpe seem all the weirder now in a world where everything must be so fervently believed in or dismissed?

For an interview with Lionel Fanthorpe, see "Godfella", **FT107:34-36**. For an account of Lionel's earlier career as a science fiction writer, see Andrew May, "Fanthorpe's Fortean Fiction", **FT297:38-42**. For Ken Campbell's thoughts on *Fortean TV*, see **FT98:47**.

## NOTES

**1** See **FT426:56-57** for Stu Neville's comprehensive review of the Network DVD.

**2** Derived from *In the Hall of the Mountain King* from Grieg's music for *Peer Gynt*.

**3** Fanthorpe is an Anglican priest in the Church of Wales. https://web.archive.org/web/20131007043852/http://www.cardiffacademy.co.uk/lionel_fanthorpe.html

**4** Heppell's obituary can be found here: https://conchsoc.org/eminent/Heppell-D.php. Sadly, he died in 2004 before he could realise his dream of writing a 'substantial' book on mermaids.

**5** https://jmedicalcasereports.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13256-021-02699-4

**6** https://journals.lww.com/epidem/fulltext/2009/11001/Fish_Consumption_in_an_Area_with_High_Incidence_of.567.aspx

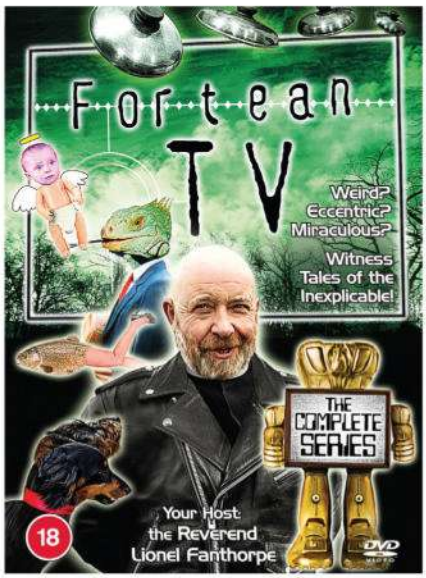
**7** https://academic.oup.com/ajcn/article/112/5/1295/5881744

**8** https://youtu.be/ylnOc5B5M-s

**9** His blog is still active and packed full of local history and forteana: https://johnknifton.com/

**10** See **FT411:45** for a summary of the issues Fort takes with this in the *Book of the Damned*.

**11** For example: www.dailymail.co.uk/health/




article-2050342/Fish-pedicures-foot-spas-spread-HIV-hepatitis-C.html

**12** This seemingly natural phenomenon continues to this day; see for example: www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/19643580.mum-daughter-marvel-allah-written-aubergine/

**13** Mainstream sources now largely write the original scare off as a mange infestation in the local population of wild dog/coyote hybrids.

**14** Fort in *Wild Talents*.

**15** www.peaceabbey.org/emily-the-sacred-cow/

**16** www.cornwalllive.com/news/cornwall-news/story-sightings-mystery-sea-creature-4092252

**17** https://adventuresweden.com/storsjoodjuret-the-great-lake-monster/

**18** https://jewishjournal.com/commentary/blogs/180500/madame-tussauds-museum-london-removed-hitler-figure/

**19** www.theguardian.com/news/blog/2008/jul/05/hitlerwaxworkinpoortaste

**20** https://sciencebasedlife.wordpress.com/2012/03/14/are-there-really-magnetic-people/

**21** www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/fake-egyptian-city-ten-commandments-california-180956907/

**22** www.absolutdata.com/learn-analytics-whitepapers-webinars/clustering-illusion-clusters-lie-in-the-eye-of-the-beholder/

**23** www.vice.com/en/article/a34dme/this-guy-paints-the-sex-he-allegedly-has-with-aliens

**24** https://paullaffoley.net/

**25** www.chelwest.nhs.uk/your-visit/patient-leaflets/tissue-viability/maggot-therapy

**26** www.specialtyproduce.com/produce/Apple_Bananas_2050.php

**27** https://newsok-pro.herokuapp.com/article/feed/185483/tomatoes-appear-to-have-strawberries-inside

**28** This highly eccentric 'vampire exorcist' withdrew from public life in 2013 following the death of his father: http://therightreverendseanmanchester.blogspot.com/2013/

**29** www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/nanteos-cup-holy-grail-mythical-wooden-object-recovered-by-police-from-anonymous-source-in-meeting-on-neutral-ground-10348591.html

**30** www.library.wales/visit/things-to-do/exhibitions/nanteos-cup

**31** www.quora.com/Why-does-the-TV-antenna-work-only-when-touched

**32** www.dovweissberg.com/

**33** www.thesun.co.uk/tvandshowbiz/12149325/ambulance-man-reports-cucumber-stuck-up-bottom/

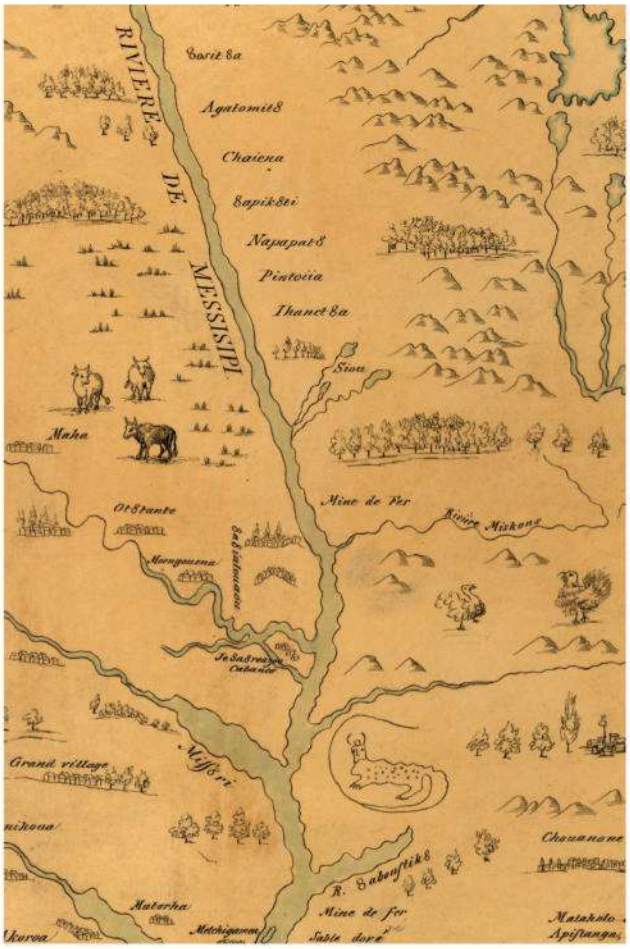
**34** www.britannica.com/topic/Sefer-ha-zohar

RYAN SHIRLOW is a Northern Irish writer, musician and fortean. His latest production is a spooky children's audio drama, *The Automatic Leprechaun*, available at ryanshirlow.bandcamp.com

# THE PIASA BIRD OF ILLINOIS

**ERIC HOFFMAN** goes in search of a legendary Mississippian monster recorded in a mysterious rock painting – and finds a tangled tale of Native American myth and modern legends

The North American landscape is populated with relics of bygone civilisations. Many predate even that of the 500 nations of Native Americans who settled the continent long before the European incursion. One relic whose origin remains shrouded in mystery is what has come to be known as the Piasa (pronounced pie-uh-saw) Bird, a remarkable, massive Native American painting, the largest ever recorded by European colonists and settlers, which originally rested over 100 feet (30m) above a floodplain on a limestone cliff a few miles north of the city of Alton, Illinois, in Madison County, at the confluence of the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers.




**LEFT:** Jean-Baptist-Louis Franquelin's 1682 map of the Mississippi shows the Piasa Bird. **BELOW:** 1678 French drawing derived from a description in Marquette's journal

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## MAPPING THE MISSISSIPPI

The recorded history of the Piasa Bird – or Birds, as the original painting consisted of two hideous mythological monsters – begins with the 17th century arrival of French colonists in what is now the Upper Midwest and Great Lakes regions of the United States. France colonised the vast area in the hope that its colony would prove as lucrative for France as the South American colonies were for Spain and Portugal. Yet the French colony quickly became embroiled in a fur trade war – dubbed the 'Beaver Wars' – with the native Iroquois tribe. At that time, the Jesuit missionary Jacques Marquette, fluent in native dialects, established several missions on the St Lawrence River along the Great Lakes. There he met members of a large Algonquin nation, the Illini, who told Marquette of a trade route previously unknown to Europeans: the Mississippi River, of which only the southern end had been explored by the Spanish nearly a century earlier. In 1673, Marquette and fur trader Louis Joliet conducted the first European exploration of the Upper Mississippi. It was during this exploration that Marquette and Joliet discovered the painting of the monstrous creatures, drawn in a multicoloured pigment high up on the cliffside. Marquette describes the sight in his journal:

*While Skirting some rocks which by Their height and length inspired awe, We saw upon one of them two painted monsters which at first made Us afraid, and upon Which the boldest savages dare not Long rest their eyes. They are as large As a calf; they have Horns on their heads Like those of a deer, a horrible look, red eyes, a beard Like a tiger's, a face somewhat like a man's, a body Covered with scales, and so Long A tail that it winds all around the Body, passing above the head and going back between the legs, ending in a Fish's tail. Green, red, and black are the three Colors composing the Picture. Moreover, these two monsters are so well painted that we cannot believe that any savage is their author; for good painters in France would find it difficult to reach that place Conveniently to paint them.*

Marquette's view that the painting was of unknown, as opposed to Native, origin, is certainly typical of the colonialist view that the natives were little more than barbaric savages. Regardless of their origin, what is genuinely perplexing about the paintings is how *anyone* could have managed to execute them, given their height upon the cliff face and the lack of any apparent outcropping on which a painter might have stood.

Other French explorers saw the image, including Robert de La Salle, yet the details

**ABOVE:** Father Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet discover the Mississippi in an illustration from John Clark Ridpath's 1893 history of the United States. **BELOW:** A 15th-16th century Ugahxpa clay figure of a Mississippian underwater panther, supernatural beings possessed of great power.

of the monster differ widely, and at least one of them describes it as something like a horse. Additional 17th century accounts exist. French cartographer Jean-Baptist-Louis Franquelin's map of the Mississippi, dated 1682, includes a rendering of the monster that is depicted in an area of the map that lies east of the Missouri River and south of the Illinois. Franquelin's depiction is derived from the description in Marquette's journal; the most recent, credible account dates to 1698, in which the observer remarked that the painting had all but disappeared. There appear to be no extant accounts of the painting throughout the 18th century, yet there do exist several contradictory accounts from the early 19th century. Around that time, William Dennis made the second extant sketch of the Piasa monster, which he called the "Flying Dragon". The sketch, dated to 1825, depicts a horned, seemingly scaly creature that suggests some of the exotic details claimed by Marquette. Nearly two decades later, John Casper Wild's lithograph of the painting and its environs appeared in *The Valley of the Mississippi Illustrated in a Series of Views* (1842), and around the same time Swiss artist Rudolf Friedrich Kurz, while travelling the western fur trading posts along the Mississippi, made a rendering of the cliff and the painting in his diary; Kurz termed the beast a "colossal eagle". Limestone quarrying, which began in the late 1940s, eventually eradicated what remained of the faded image.

## IT WAS A POWERFUL CREATURE OF THE UNDERWORLD WITH THE HEAD AND PAWS OF A GIANT CAT

### DRAGONS AND UNDERWATER PANTHERS

What the Piasa Bird – or dragon, or monster – is, and who painted it remains a matter of conjecture. Modern day ethnologists believe that the Piasa painting represents a mythological creature of unknown origin. Its location on a cliff riddled with caves suggests an Underworld habitat; and its position at an area of the river dangerous due to rapids, swift currents, and continual flooding suggests a harbinger of danger and death. Interestingly, the Native Americans did not view the creature as evil; instead, it was seen as a being of considerable power, and therefore something they should fear. Indeed, Marquette's journal notes how his Illini canoe paddlers became fearful as they approached it. On a later expedition, Illini paddlers of the French missionary Father de St Cosme left offerings to the beast, to avoid risk at the confluence of the rivers and to obtain powers the creature offered. As pointed out in a relatively recent account,[1] Franquelin's portrayal of the monster is quite like the mythological "underwater panther" of the indigenous people of the Northeastern Woodlands and Great Lakes region of the Upper Midwest, a powerful creature of the Underworld, depicted with the head and paws of a giant cat,

MINNEAPOLIS INSTITUTE OF ART

**ABOVE:** The Piasa Rock as depicted in a coloured lithograph by Henry Lewis in *Das Illustrirte Mississippitha* (Dusseldorf, 1850-1859); curiously, the image shows a second painting of what appears to be a horned or cat-like head somewhat reminiscent of an 'underwater panther'.

covered in scales, with spikes along its back and tail. The Ojibwe tribe, who called them Mishipeshu or Mishibijiw, believed these underwater panthers had control over all aquatic animals, as well as snakes.

However, if the tribes that populated the area are not the source of the image, as Marquette suspected, then it is theoretically possible that the painting could have originated at a much earlier date. The bluff on which the original Piasa was painted was of very high-quality, consisting of a nearly eight-foot (2.4m) thick layer of lithographic limestone, which, as its name attests, can hold images for a considerable length of time. That, along with a lack of knowledge about Native cultures or scientific tools such as carbon dating, deeply complicates fixing the actual age of the painting. Of course, given the Natives' dependence on oral tradition, there are no written records to consult.

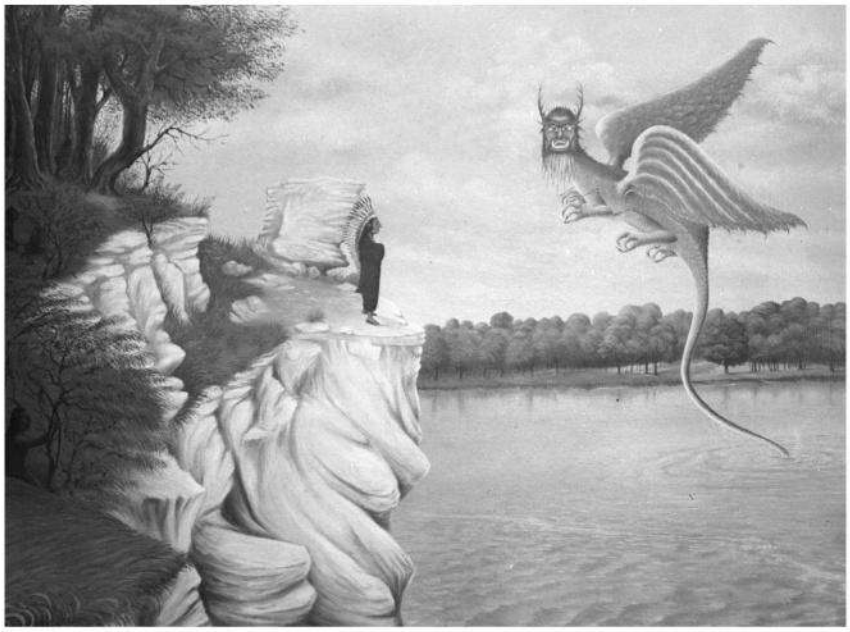
Certain archæologists and ethnologists speculate that the Piasa painting may in fact date to what is known as the Mississippian period (AD 1000-1500). Indeed, the painting may very well be an iconograph of the pre-Columbian mound building civilisation of Cahokia, who lived in the fertile American Bottoms centuries before, a civilisation thought to have lasted nearly 600 years. Its capital was six square miles and its population at its height in the 13th century would likely have surpassed London at the time; their earthen mounds were the largest pre-Colombian earthworks and represented the largest pyramids north of Mesoamerica. Iconographs of other creatures, including falcons, thunderbirds, bird men, and monstrous snakes were common Cahokian motifs and frequently appear engraved on ceramic bowls and cups discovered by archæologists in other sites within the vicinity of the Mississippi River basin. Yet since Cahokian culture disappeared as long ago as the 14th century, how could this artwork remain still visible and vibrantly coloured as late as the 19th? Other preserved prehistoric paintings still extant in the Illinois region show that in their paintings and glyphs ancient Native American cultures routinely used natural materials such as iron oxides that gradually fade yet take considerable time to disappear. Therefore, it is entirely plausible that the Piasa Bird could have originated as early as the 12th or 13th centuries and managed to endure as late as the 18th century. In fact, it is only due to destructive action such as mining that the eventual weathering of exposed rock elements hastened the painting's disappearance.

## 18TH CENTURY EUROPEAN SETTLERS ROUTINELY USED THE PAINTINGS FOR TARGET PRACTICE

Furthermore, 18th century European settlers, travelling the river by boat, routinely used the paintings as target practice, perhaps mimicking traditional Native behaviour. According to the *History of Madison County* (1882), the two monsters represented the Good and the Evil Manitou, aspects of the Great Spirit, and that Natives frequently shot their arrows, and later guns, at the creature, in a ceremonial rite. Illini tribe members would shoot arrows at the painting as a salute to their Chief Ouatoga who, according to some versions of the legend, is said to have vanquished the creature that inspired the painting. By the 1870s, thanks to the removal of a substantial portion of the cliff face, the area of the original painting had entirely withered away.

### INVENTED TRADITIONS

The current Piasa Bird, painted on a bluff near Alton, Illinois, and located over 100 yards upstream of the location of the original, is a far different depiction, one



**ABOVE LEFT:** Chief Ouatoga and the Piasa Bird in a painting owned by author William McAdams. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The caves beneath the cliffs – in some accounts, the monster's abode. **BELOW:** John Casper Wild's lithograph of the painting and its environs as it appeared in *The Valley of the Mississippi Illustrated in a Series of Views* (1842).

that has evolved over time. The most obvious difference is the addition of massive wings; a picture on a 1678 map does not include any wings and is likely a far more accurate representation of the version witnessed by Marquette. In fact, the origin of the creature's current name and portrayal is an apocryphal and widely disseminated article "The Piasa: An Indian Tradition of Illinois", by Bluffdale, Illinois, resident John Russell, first published in *The Family Magazine, or Monthly Abstract of General Knowledge* in 1836. According to Russell, a Baptist minister and former local professor of Greek and Latin at Shurtleff College in Alton, the Piasa Bird – a name Russell took from a creek that used to run through downtown Alton prior to its burial to make way for a road – is in fact a vicious, man-eating monster that lived in the bluff's caverns and who would on occasion attack the residents of nearby villages. Eventually, a plan was devised by the heroic Chief Ouatoga – a plan given to him in a dream by the Great Spirit – to lure the Bird out from its hiding place and to kill it with poisoned arrows. According to Russell, the painting was made to memorialise Ouatoga's heroism.

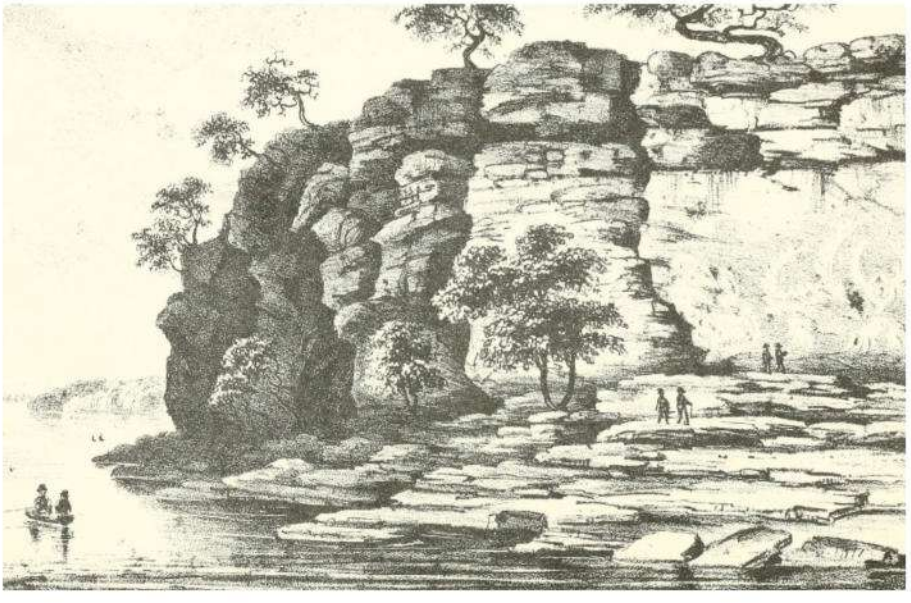
Writes Russell:

*Many thousand moons before the arrival of the pale faces, when the great Megalonyx and Mastodon, whose bones are now dug up, were still living in the land of green prairies, there existed a bird of such dimensions that he could easily carry off in his talons a full-grown deer. Having obtained a taste for human flesh, from that time he would prey on nothing else. He was artful as he was powerful, and would dart suddenly and unexpectedly upon an Indian, bear him off into one of the caves of the bluff, and devour him. Hundreds of warriors attempted for years to destroy him, but without success. Whole villages were nearly depopulated, and consternation spread through all the tribes of the Illini.*

*Such was the situation when Ouatoga, the great chief of the Illini, whose fame extended beyond the Great Lakes, separating himself from the rest of his tribe, fasted in solitude for the space of a whole moon, and prayed to the Great Spirit, the Master of Life, that he would protect his children from the Piasa. On the last night of the fast, the Great Spirit appeared to Ouatoga in a dream, and directed him to select twenty of his bravest warriors, each armed with a bow and poisoned arrows, and conceal them in a designated spot. Near the place of concealment, another warrior was to stand in open view, as a victim for the Piasa, which they must shoot the instant he pounced upon his prey.*

*When the chief awoke in the morning, he thanked the Great Spirit, and returning to his tribe, told them his vision. The warriors were quickly selected and placed in ambush as directed. Ouatoga offered himself as the victim. He was willing to die for his people. Placing himself in open view on the bluffs, he soon saw the Piasa perched on the cliff, eying his prey. The chief drew up his manly form to his utmost height, and planting his feet firmly upon the earth, he began to chant the death-song of an Indian warrior. The moment after, the Piasa arose into the air, and swift as the thunderbolt, darted down on his victim. Scarcely had the horrid creature reached his prey before every bow was sprung and every arrow was sent quivering to the feather into his body. The Piasa uttered a fearful scream, which sounded far over the opposite side of the river and expired. Ouatoga was unharmed. Not an arrow, not even the talons of the bird had touched him. The Master of Life, in admiration of Ouatoga's deed, had held over him an invisible shield.*

*There was the wildest rejoicing among the Illini, and the brave chief was carried in triumph*

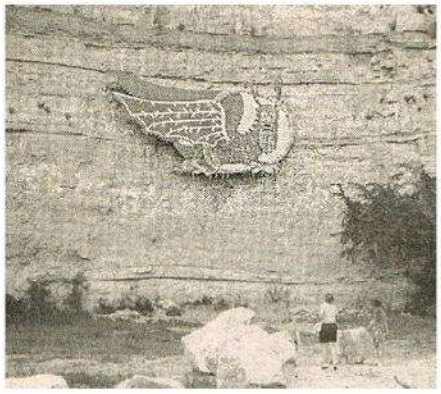


**ABOVE:** A postcard of the 1920 Piasa Bird reproduction on the cliff face in the 1940s, and a colour photo of it in the 1950s. **BELOW:** The metal replacement that was bolted onto the cliffside in 1983. **BOTTOM OF PAGE:** The steel Piasa Bird now resides on the Alton High School football field.

*to the council house, where it was solemnly agreed that, in memory of the great event in their nation's history, the image of the Piasa should be engraved on the bluff... Even at this day an Indian never passes the spot in his canoe without firing his gun at the figure of the Piasa. The marks of the balls on the rock are almost innumerable.*

Furthermore, Russell claims a Native led him inside the monster's abode, a secret cavern located high on the cliffside. "The roof of the cavern was vaulted, and the top was hardly less than 20 feet [6m] high," Russell observes. "The shape of the cavern was irregular, but so far as I could judge, the bottom would average 20 by 30 feet [6m by 9m]. The floor of the cavern throughout its whole extent was one mass of human bones. Skulls and other bones were mingled in the utmost confusion. To what depth they extended I was unable to decide, but we dug to the depth of three or four feet in every part of the cavern, and still we found only bones. The remains of thousands must have been deposited here. How and by whom, and for what purpose, it is impossible to conjecture."

To further confuse matters, Russell subsequently published a variation on the legend in the 28 October 1847 issue of the *Illinois Journal*, wherein the Piasa was a giant condor slain by a Native American named Alpeoria, before reverting to his original version in a 14 July 1848, issue of an Evangelical magazine, *Gospel Advocate*. In his book *Records of Ancient Races in the Mississippi Valley* (1887), author William McAdams relates that when he contacted John Russell about the article's provenance, Russell begrudgingly admitted that the story was "somewhat illustrated". Yet another complication is that the JC Wild lithograph from *The Valley of the Mississippi*



*Illustrated* shows a creature with wings. McAdams believed that this portrayal was based upon a first-hand observation of what remained of the original. The inclusion of wings, not mentioned in earlier observations, appears to be an artistic flourish upon the part of Wild, possibly influenced by Russell's popular article, as opposed to an accurate depiction of the remnants of the actual painting. Interestingly, McAdams also notes that this painting was not the only one in the region and that atop the bluff above these pictographs existed mounds that, when excavated, revealed human remains, giving

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**ABOVE:** The current depiction of the Piasa Bird by Alton resident Dave Stevens. **RIGHT:** Alton Middle School teacher Mimi Almonroeder and a papier-mâché version of the Piasa Bird made by students.

further credence to Russell's version of the events.

Russell later admitted to his son that his account of the legend was a complete fabrication, yet by then the story had already taken hold of the public's imagination.

Since 1920, when the legend was essentially rediscovered by brothers and Alton natives Herbert and Orland Forcade, repeated recreations of the painting at various locations along the cliff face – the Forcades simply chose the location they thought to be the most likely location of the original – and in various media have roughly followed Russell's apocryphal portrayal. The 1920 painting was destroyed in 1950 when the road was widened, and because the condition of the exposed non-lithographic limestone leads to frequent weathering, subsequent versions repeatedly washed away or quickly deteriorated. To provide a more permanent solution, in 1983 the Town of Alton had a steel version fabricated and bolted into the cliffside; yet eventually that too fell victim to the elements – namely rust – so it was removed and relocated to the Alton High School football field, where it currently resides. In 1999, local artist Dave Stevens repainted the Piasa Bird on the Bluff, in an enormous version that measures 22 feet (6.7m) high and 48 feet (14.6m) wide.

Whether the painting was a leftover from Cahokian civilisation, a representation of the Good and Evil Manitou, or a version of the underwater panther of Native legend, it is Russell's fictional version, probably inspired by other regional and otherwise unrecorded Native legends, that remains the best-known and has inarguably most captured the popular imagination.

## NOTES

1 Duan Esarey, Vincas Steponaitis, Michael McCafferty, David Costa, "Untangling the Piasa's Tale: A Revised Interpretation of Illinois' Most Famous Rock Art", www.youtube.com/watch?v=gP2nR_PqIMk, Illinois State Archaeological Survey/East Central Illinois Archaeological Society (ECIAS), 2015.

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# Crooks, angels and demons: the Butler affair

On 13 July Donald Trump was the target of an attempted assassination at a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania. The former president walked away with just a grazed ear – miraculously, according to his supporters – but the manifold oddities and unanswered questions left in the wake of the incident have created fertile ground for conspiracy theories. ***NOEL ROONEY*** surveys the scene.

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*"We'll know our disinformation program is complete when everything the American public believes is false." William J Casey, CIA director, 1981*

Reality is a strictly local phenomenon: that, or blandly universal. Move between those points and you'll soon discover it doesn't scale well; at times it seems to disappear under the weight of some more urgent vision of the world. At times of high tension or tragedy, the mundane and high strangeness meld in uncanny ways.

Reality – visceral and, for some, sadly fatal – certainly came to the little town of Butler, Pennsylvania, on a Saturday in mid-July; but it had company.

Donald Trump (our protagonist, in a peculiar, passive sense) was its prime companion. The Donald, even from this distance, often appears rather more than real. The former reality TV star, and former president (and what could be more, or less, authentic?) held a rally for his supporters in a field at the edge of town. The rest is very definitely not history.

Let's start with the bare story (what in normal circumstances might represent the reality of the incident): Thomas Matthew Crooks, a resident of Bethel Park, about 50 miles from Butler, took his father's assault rifle and left home. He went to a DIY store and bought a five-foot ladder and 50 rounds of ammunition. He drove to Butler, found a good parking spot, took the ladder, rifle, and a range finder, and went to scope out the target. He was seen by numerous people, who alerted the police.

*Either he was a patsy, or he chose to act exactly as a patsy would*

Then, presumably using the five-foot ladder, he climbed onto the roof of an industrial building with his rifle and settled in for the kill. A police officer, alerted to his presence, vaulted onto the roof edge. Crooks threatened him with a gun so the officer retreated.

Crooks immediately turned and started firing. He got three shots off before Secret Service/police snipers killed him. One bullet hit Mr Trump, grazing his ear. That same bullet either killed or injured a bystander, as did his other two shots.

Trump was then surrounded by Secret Service agents and covered. (Why on Earth did the Secret Service people take off his shoes?) He got up, made a defiant gesture, and was led to safety. It was, bullets aside, just another day at the electoral coalface.

At this point, reality makes its excuses and leaves.

## THE STORIES

The legacy media immediately told a story: Mr Tump fell at a rally in Pennsylvania and was escorted from the stage by his security team; Mr Trump said he'd been shot; there were reports of loud noises. But the legacy media were right there, and reality is a strictly local phenomenon; surely they knew their story would be quickly superseded, would look hollow and even pernicious in light of actual events. Blood was staining the stage before the copy reached the æther.

That first story hardly had time to raise a few cursory eyebrows before a torrent of citizen journalism flooded social media; everyone at the rally had a smart phone. Images and videos of the incident appeared. And the story they told first drowned the mainstream account and then exploded into a kaleidoscope of strangeness.

Crooks was seen by so many people he was practically a sideshow. At least one person seems to have known him; a voice can be heard calling him by his surname and telling him to get off the roof. This led some to theorise that he had a handler on the scene; a friend or neighbour would use his first name, surely.

He seems to have done

everything in his power to get noticed and, presumably, caught; bystanders did their best to help him. But the Secret Service, perhaps sensing a deeper, more oblique strategy in play, refused to bite. Watching the numerous video clips, one could be forgiven for thinking they were goading him into action by doing nothing.

He was identified more or less immediately by, according to official sources, DNA and facial recognition. Odd, since he must have had ID on him; he'd just bought a bunch of bullets from a shop. Facial recognition took a turn for the bizarre when a photo of the deceased shooter was posted; almost immediately, doubt was cast on his identity, and within hours, a number of alternative candidates were proposed.

Three days after the shooting, the FBI claimed to have found incriminating evidence on social media posts. Crooks allegedly posted on Steam (a gaming channel): "July 13 will be my premiere, watch as it unfolds." He had photos of Trump, and Biden, on his phone, along with other political figures. He had been to the rally ground at Butler, and also researched the Democratic National Convention. He had, in other words, not only incriminated himself in relation to the actual shooting; he had volunteered himself as a potential suspect for any number of future events.

It's remarkable how many assassination stories, particularly those carried out by members of the lone nut gun club, feature prime suspects acting like patsies. Crooks left a trail that could probably be seen from space. On the day of the shooting he bought ammunition and a ladder using his debit card; he drove his own car to the rally; he made little attempt to conceal himself as he scoped the area and chose his spot. And his parents, perhaps noticing the missing rifle, reported him missing to the local police. So two optional realities: either he was a patsy, or he chose to act exactly as a patsy would because that's lone nut gun club protocol.

His dual role doesn't stop there. According to high school peers he was bullied, and he wasn't; he was a truculent loner, and he was gentle and kind; he was obviously conservative, and he kept his politics to himself; he was a registered Republican, and he donated to Democrat causes. Perhaps the creepiest comment was from a classmate who said he was often teased by people shouting, "Hey, look at the school shooter!"

## HAUNTING ECHOES

There are haunting echoes of previous assassinations (JFK in particular) all over the Butler incident. The most obvious is the magic bullet. Crooks, we are told, was a terrible shot; his school gun club refused him membership, effectively saying he couldn't hit a cow's bum with a banjo. Yet, in the few seconds between threatening a police officer and being shot dead, he got off three rounds that hit four people, killing one of them, and miraculously grazing Trump's ear without real damage.

In another Kennedy echo, JFK Jnr attended the rally. Vincent Fusca, who regularly turns up at Trump events, has been 'identified' by a few QAnon devotees (yes, a few of them are still here) as the late president's son; the son who died in a tragic air accident in 1999. I should add that the post where I saw this material was definitely not written by a QAnon supporter; in the post, they are referred to as Qtards, a less than complimentary term used by Reddit and 8Chan. But they still spread the meme.

A lone nut acting like a patsy; a magic bullet; a ghost scion of the Kennedy clan; more bullets than can be accounted for; the field of action is pestered by spirits now, haunted by illusions of an illusory past.

## SECURITY LAPSES

Much of the suspicion about the shooting focuses on the actions (or lack thereof) of the police and Secret Service teams. Initially, many people were asking why the building used by Crooks, an obvious sniper nest with a clear line of sight to the stage, was not crawling with agents; later it was claimed (wrongly) that it was full of agents, but they were inside and apparently didn't hear anyone on the roof. Perhaps a more germane question for conspiracists is how Crooks knew that roof was right for the job and would be empty.

And why, people asked, did the Secret Service snipers wait for Crooks to fire before they shot him? They obviously had a bead on him and reports surfaced suggesting they had spotted him as suspicious up to half an hour before the incident, but contrived to lose him in the crowds (the crowds he doesn't appear to have been in). Rumours of 'stand down' orders circulated and added to the false flag momentum.

From the generally incoherent reporting on security, it seems that Trump's regular team had the day off and were replaced by temps; and the command staff were pulled away to look after Jill Biden, who was attending a dinner nearby: Flotus, it seems, has higher clearance than Ex-Potus. And of course, Jill Biden could have been – wittingly or otherwise – a decoy, to pull protective resources from Trump. Much was made of the observation that some of the

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**TOP**: The shooter, Thomas Crooks. **ABOVE**: Republican Congressman Pat Fallon points to a photo of Butler Farms showing Crooks's position, on that infamously sloping roof, in relation to the rally stage.

temps were rather shorter than Trump; how would they protect him – jump up and down?

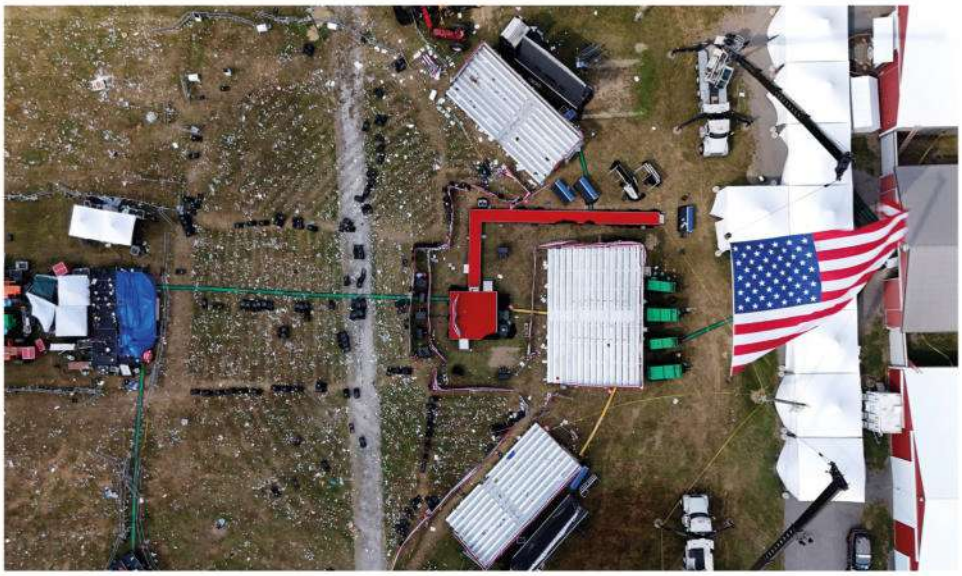
It gets darker. Video emerged online showing a member of the protection detail leave the podium and usher people away; some thought (and it does look that way) that he was clearing people from the line of sight. After the all clear ("Shooter down" can clearly be heard) they forgot to let go of their protégé and pushed him to the car in a clumsy scrum. Some of them didn't seem to know where their holsters were or how they worked.

The picture was further muddled by reports of a second shooter (a prime trope in assassination lore). This claim was bolstered by reports that at least eight shots were fired. Like Dealey Plaza in 1963, the little field outside Butler seems to have had a surplus of viable ingredients for every version of events. Second shooter theories are already complex and rich with evidence; they will only get more so. We may come to the point reached in JFK investigations, where there are so many candidates for villainy the salient question is not who was in Dealey Plaza, but rather who wasn't.

All the visual elements for a set-up were on display. Even at this early point there was sufficient material – Crooks's eccentric behaviour, the security farce, the suspicious moves on video – to provoke awkward questions from some quarters. Is it any wonder that conspiracy theories sprang up like instant weeds in the media garden?

NEWSCOM / ALAMY STOCK PHOTOPHOTO

The head of the Secret Service tried to dampen speculation, but she only made things worse. There were no officers on the fatal roof, she explained, for health and safety reasons; the slope might have injured someone. The by now famous photos of Secret Service snipers on a roof with a steeper pitch rather undermined her gambit. Kimberley Cheatle is a recent appointee to the post and said that she would focus on diversity. Some wondered if that explained the vertically challenged officers around Trump. Cheatle is also reputedly a personal appointee of Jill Biden, further dragging the First Lady into the conspiratorial mire. One might say that the shooter managed to wing the Trumps and the Bidens with the same bullet.



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**ABOVE**: The Butler rally site after the shooting. **BELOW**: Secret Service head Kimberley Cheatle faced questions in Congress.

## THE THEORIES

Dualism is integral to conspiracy theories that appeared so quickly they appeared to be part of the incident itself. The events – and the bipartisan reporting of them – allowed both Trump supporters and opponents to see a deeper, darker version, and to see it almost instantly.

For supporters, the shooting was real but the actors were not. The now iconic images – a defiant Trump, fist raised, Old Glory behind him (it has been dubbed Iwo Jima 2.0) in particular – tell the truth around which all other details are arranged. The Deep State tried, and failed, to take him out. That explains everything; all the intricate analysis is a sideshow, although the sheer bulk of it suggests someone was enjoying the exercise.

For opponents, the actors were real but the shooting was faked. This rendition requires more effort to reconstruct plausibly; real hurt and real blood need to be accounted for. The BlueAnon efforts were intricate and fragile but, as with their patriot counterparts, the central message is the important feature. It's a hard sell for some; having painted Trump as the kind of villain every right-thinking lone nut should be lining up in the crosshairs, they had to paint the lone nut as a patsy firing blanks – blanks that killed one person and seriously wounded two others.

Neither story was true in the mundane sense (but then how true was the legacy media version?); that wasn't the point. The inchoate confusion of actual events, the wild version, needed taming, and quickly. Biden's stumble towards obscurity, and Trump's seemingly inevitable rise to power, demanded it.

There is a third stream of conspiracy theory around the tragedy. This is provided by people who see no difference between Biden and Trump, between Dem and Rep. For them, the Q/Blue distinction is irrelevant, and both versions hold equal weight; the whole event was part of the uni-party circus. Trump and Crooks were co-stars who could be flipped from victim to villain to hero depending on how things turned out. If Crooks missed, it was a false flag; if he scored, it was a Deep State hit. One might almost call this a realist strain of conspiracy theory.

Further claims came from – and about – places far from Butler, PA. TASS, the organ of the Soviet Nomenklatura now repurposed as Putin's propaganda broadsheet, ran a story claiming that the attempted hit was a Ukrainian plot. A prominent Ukrainian opposition leader, now in exile (one wonders where), had information that Zelensky had ordered Trump murdered, allegedly because he feared that Trump would not support Ukraine as Biden had done.

I like to think there is a more plausible explanation for this most implausible of theories. Just a few days ago, Joe Biden, in front of a live audience of NATO bigwigs, introduced Mr Zelensky as Mr Putin. What more fitting revenge than to fatally mistake Mr Trump for Mr Biden?

The CIA claimed credible intelligence that Iran was planning to off the Donald in case he decided to break the presidential mould and start a war with them. So everyone wanted him dead, including his own party hierarchy. However you look at it, Donald Trump is a very lucky individual.

The World Economic Forum is implicated; a whistleblower leaked an internal memo putting Trump on a target list where some names (such as Fico)

were already crossed off. At this point, the only reference we are missing is to the Clinton Body Count; and that may well be in place by the time you read this article.

## GOD AND THE GOP

Let's talk about religion. A crowd gathers – a crowd of believers for the most part – to hear a prophet speak. Before the speech, an angel appears; an angel seen more easily, if at all, by the faithful. This is not the regular stuff of political conspiracy. The angel is a distorted configuration of the American flag (see p.7); for a Christian patriot, that's tantamount to seeing God. Whatever it meant to those people who saw it, that meaning changed immediately the first shot rang out.

For the patriot right, Trump was already under the protection of greater powers. So at first the angel was divine approbation: this is my son in whom I am well pleased. And in the immediate aftermath, it became divine protection: God will let no harm fall on His prophet.

There is another possible reading of the angel that no one seems to have picked up on yet. As much as it vaguely resembles an angel, it is also potentially a raptor. While the eagle and the flag represent American power – used for good or for ill, and both are present here – the apparition could also take on a role similar to the Mothman; a harbinger of terrible events. It's curious to think that a strain of strangeness wholly alien to traditional conspiracy theory may have governed the entire affair.

The angel may have done more than simply protect God's candidate. Donald Trump Junior said that the shooting, and the narrow escape, had changed his father. He was throwing away the speech he had prepared for the Republican National Convention and writing something new; something about unity and peace, about treasuring what unites us and not what divides us. His RNC speech was indeed more conciliatory than expected, if not a full Damascene epiphany. And for his supporters, his status as God's candidate is assured.

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**LEFT:** Touched by the hand of God? Jesus appears to be right behind Trump on one supporter's T-Shirt

*The apparition could take on a role similar to the Mothman*

Echoes of the past again; in 1972, George Wallace, a firebrand candidate, was shot and paralysed while on campaign. His politics softened noticeably after the attack, at least in the short term. Perhaps wounded epiphany is a secret, redemptive motif of American politics.

## OUTCOMES

Mr Trump will very likely be the next president of the USA. The likelihood of anyone getting close enough to Trump to harm him is now very remote; he is probably the safest politician on the planet, until he's elected at least.

Mr Biden has withdrawn from the election, though he will continue as president. Some commentators see this as a sign of his innocence in the assassination attempt; if he knew anything, no Deep State maven would leave him in place to spill the beans. Others agonise about a demented finger on the nuclear button.

Delegates at the RNC wore bandages on their ears as 'a sign of love' for Trump. Democrats were too busy looking for a candidate to mock them.

The campaign will look very different now. Images of Trump as Hitler may not be so plentiful, nor terms such as 'bullseye' or 'threat to democracy'. The people who promoted those slogans are now wishing Mr Trump well; as befits the dual nature of recent events, they are as sincere in this as they were in their insults.

The stories will inevitably expand beyond the confines of that little field in Butler. I have seen posts linking the Crowdstrike outage to the event; they are currently tenuous but time may offer them tentacles. Further development may now revert to more traditional conspiracy theorists. Instant analysis is fraught with confusion and tends to prosper on lack of evidence and anomalies; but this event has so many overtones that I would expect some grand narrative input, elevating a minor tragedy into a central spoke of the conspiratorial wheel.This story will survive the exigencies of the news cycle, then, and haunt both the election and Mr Trump's probable second term. (I'm curious to see if some observers attempt to turn it against him once he's in the big chair.) Details, real and otherwise, are appearing faster than I – or anyone – can read them. The stories are still warm and malleable, and currently exclusively political, but who knows what shape they will take when all the scattered details appear under a single lens?

Strangeness has retired to the margins, for now; and the little town of Butler is – hopefully – beginning to return to normal. But a shadow (in the shape of an angel?) lingers over us all. The magic bullet may have only grazed Mr Trump's ear; but reality got it right between the eyes.

## SOURCES

Far too many to list individually, but the following sites were consulted: www.conspiracy.news; www.globalresearch.ca; https://thegrayzone.com; www.sott.net; www.dailymail.co.uk; www.telegraph.co.uk; https://andrewdoyle.substack.com; https://thepeoplesvoice.tv/; https://edition.cnn.com; https://rense.com; www.zerohedge.com; www.abovetopsecret.com; www.msn.com; https://henrymakow.com; www.unz.com; www.bbc.co.uk; www.eugyppius.com; www.spiked-online.com; https://noqreport.com; https://off-guardian.org; www.lewrockwell.com; https://revolver.news; https://thepeoplesvoice.tv; https://apnews.com; https://allnewspipeline.com; www.forbes.com; www.globalresearch.ca; https://greatgameindia.com; stateofthenation.co; www.armstrongeconomics.com; www.thegatewaypundit.com; slaynews.com

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FORT TALK

RUPERT SHELDRAKE

CONTINUING HIS SERIES OF INTERVIEWS WITH PROMINENT FORTEAN FIGURES, GORDON RUTTER TALKS TO BIOLOGIST

# RUPERT SHELDRAKE

Rupert Sheldrake's name is probably familiar to readers of *Fortean Times*. The now 81-year-old academic studied biology and biochemistry at Cambridge and philosophy of science at Harvard and has worked as a researcher for the Royal Society and as a plant physiologist in India. It sounds like an impressive academic resumé; but when you add his work on morphic resonance, the 'sense of being stared at' and dogs who know when their owners are coming home (to name just some of his research interests) we see a rather less traditional career pathway. Throw in an attempt on his life and a banned, and much discussed, TED talk (**FT302:14-16**) and this is clearly someone with an extraordinary set of life experiences. I recently met up with him for a chat.

ETIENNE GILFILLAN

## A NEW SCIENCE OF LIFE

I was interested in what had caused a previously traditional scientist to switch paths. Rupert started off as a plant scientist working on auxins (plant hormones) with the traditional route laid out in front of him and enjoying great success in his field. Then, in 1981, he came out with his morphic resonance theory in the book *A New Science of Life*. What had brought about that change?

"Well the change really took place when I was still in Cambridge. I was a fellow of Clare College, teaching cell biology, and I thought of the idea of morphic resonance in 1973; and the reason I thought of it was that I was doing research on plant development or morphogenesis – the development of form – and I was convinced that the genes alone couldn't explain it. So I got interested in the idea of morphogenetic fields – form shaping fields – which was first proposed in biology at the beginning of the 1920s. So it was not a new idea – the idea that some kind

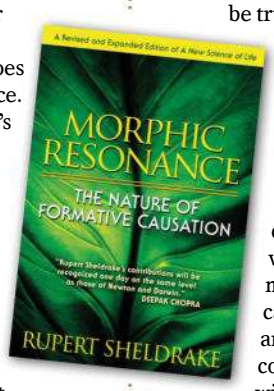
of invisible form or blueprint or field shapes developing organisms.

"The shape can't be carried in the genes, because all the genes do is programme the synthesis of proteins. So I thought this idea of morphogenetic fields would explain the shape or form of a flower petal because there's a kind of mould or blueprint for the developing organ. But the big problem was how to understand the inheritance of morphogenetic fields. If they weren't inherited through genes, then how *could* they be inherited? I couldn't see any way this could happen, and then I read what was for me a very seminal book, namely *Matter and Memory* by the French philosopher Henri Bergson. This was originally written in 1896 and translated into English in 1911. It argued that memories are not stored in the brain and there's a kind of causation working directly across time. And this was, for me, a huge revelation. And then I tried to think how organisms could inherit forms across time and how would it be specific enough to go from one organism to a similar one later on. And the idea that came to my mind was morphic resonance. So I thought of it in 1973. I was very excited and thought here's this whole new way of interpreting biology, and a lot of other things. But I realised that I couldn't publish it at that stage because I hadn't thought it through enough and I knew it would be controversial. So I left my fellowship in Cambridge and I took a job in India doing agricultural research in a mainstream international institute – very practical work, plant breeding. I was the principal plant physiologist helping plant breeders breed better crops and better cropping systems. All of that I enjoyed, but all that time I was working in Hyderabad I went on thinking about morphic resonance and reading relevant scientific literature. I got to the point where I felt I could actually write it up as a book, and I spent a year and a half living in an ashram in South India. The book was published in 1981 and I'd been living in India for years before that; so while it appeared to come out of nowhere, it had really been gestating for a long time. It wasn't a sudden eruption of something totally new into an otherwise conventional scientific career."

I wondered if during that incubation phase he had tried to assemble practical evidence, either collected from experiments he was conducting or from previous literature, to show what he was building on?

"Well I couldn't really do practical experiments at the Crop Research Institute because it was an agricultural institute and if I had done morphic resonance experiments they would have taken years, because you would have to have a crop in one season, then do something in the next season, and I wasn't being employed to do that. There was a limit to what I could do, so what I did in the first instance was to review existing scientific literature and I found many examples of phenomena that looked as if they were morphic resonance effects; so my book is based primarily on the published scientific literature, but also with suggestions for experimental tests. The third edition of *A New Science of Life* (2009) contains an appendix with a summary of research. So far, quite a number of people have done experiments, including me, and the evidence does seem to support morphic resonance. I wouldn't call it conclusive, but it's certainly helpful and suggestive. It's an ongoing project."

> " I TAKE THE VIEW THAT SCIENCE IS A METHOD OF ENQUIRY AND NOT A BELIEF SYSTEM, AND THEY TAKE THE VIEW THAT IT'S A BELIEF SYSTEM AND THEY THINK THEY'RE RIGHT!"


A Revised and Expanded Edition of A New Science of Life
MORPHIC RESONANCE
THE NATURE OF FORMATIVE CAUSATION
"Rupert Sheldrake's contributions will be recognized one day on the same level as those of Newton and Darwin."
DEEPAK CHOPRA
RUPERT SHELDRAKE

## THE MATERIALIST ORTHODOXY

When the book came out there was a controversy in *Nature*, which some people interpreted as *Nature* calling for the book to be burnt, even when that wasn't what was actually said. Was this in a sense symptomatic of his career – people castigating his work without bothering to look at the evidence?

"Well, people who oppose what I'm doing are usually defenders of the present materialist orthodoxy and most of them are absolutely sure they are right. They are true believers. The editor of *Nature*, Sir John Maddox, was a really hardcore atheist, rationalist and sceptic of psychic phenomena. It wasn't just kind of a vague interest – he was a militant member of these kinds of organised sceptic organisations. Most of the people who've attacked my work have been militant atheists. I think it's because they've put their faith in science. It's become for them an alternative to religion – in fact, a kind of religion of its own – and what they interpret as my attacks on science are to them deeply offensive, heretical and something that needs to be opposed very strongly. Basically they identify science itself with the belief system of scientism, which is mechanistic materialism. I take the view that science is a method of enquiry and not a belief system, and they take the view that it's a belief system and they think they're right and any evidence I produce must be flawed. They know it can't be true, because they're so sure that all the things I'm saying are impossible, so all they need to do is swat it away by saying it's rubbish or pseudoscience, and as far as they're concerned that's the end of the story.

"This continues to this very day. A couple of years ago Steven Pinker, a noted atheist and materialist, published a book called *Rationality* in which he argued that psychic phenomena could be dismissed out of hand without looking at the evidence *because they are impossible*. I challenged him to a debate. He said he couldn't do it because he hadn't got the bandwidth. When I asked why not, he said if he did the debate he'd have to read the evidence, and he hadn't time to do that. So he then tried to get the

TOPFOTO / FORTEAN

**FACING PAGE:** In 1982 *FT* interviewed Rupert Sheldrake about the *New Science of Life* controversy. **ABOVE:** In 1992, Rupert helped organise the first (and last) International Crop Circle Making Competition.

well-known sceptic Michael Shermer to do a debate with me instead, and Shermer and I did do a debate at the *How the Light Gets In* festival in Hay on Wye in summer 2023 – which is now online. And Shermer hasn't read the evidence either. All he did was produce generic arguments basically saying science is perfectly fine the way it is and we don't need to rock the boat: there's no need to have all these outrageous theories. If they are so good, why don't you just prove it? And if they're true, why hasn't everyone accepted it? A kind of circular argument: I'm not going to believe it until everyone else has believed it, and if they haven't, it proves there's nothing in it. Basically, an appeal to authority.

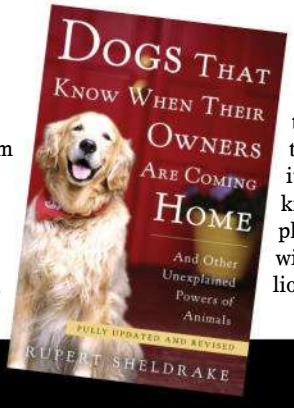
"Most scientists, I would say, are not hardcore atheists and materialists. Recent surveys have shown about 25% in Britain, France and Germany would qualify as hardcore atheists and materialists, but about 45% say they are spiritual and/or religious. Then there are some who say they're agnostic, so it's not an overwhelming majority. But the atheists try and give the impression that they represent mainstream scientific orthodoxy and that almost everyone agrees with them, which is just not true.

It's not a new problem, as *Fortean Times* has exposed for many years, and as Charles Fort explained, there's always been a tendency for people to want to stay within comfortable materialist worldviews and dismiss anything that doesn't fit in. And of course Fort had a lot of fun looking at these dismissals of phenomena. He not only collected strange phenomena but collected standard dismissals of them, like when fish fall from the sky there's always some professor somewhere who says there must have been a whirlwind that sucked them up from the sea, without any evidence that it actually happened."

## TELEPATHIC DOGS

Some of Rupert's most fascinating research has originated outside of the world of mainstream science and has enjoyed a far more general appeal – for example, his work on dogs who know when their owners are coming home (see **FT98:48, 265:52-52327:32, 360:18-20, 362:73**). Has he found any other star performers like Jaytee, whose seemingly telepathic abilities made the headlines?

"Well, I did another study with a completely different dog, Kane, which was published in a scientific peer-reviewed journal showing a very similar pattern of behaviour. I have well over 1,000 case studies of reports from people about their dogs that do this, and about 500-600 about cats that do the same thing, and then others about parrots [**FT145:26**], budgerigars, horses, tame lambs and other animals that do it. So surveys show it's quite common. About 50% of dogs know when their owners are coming home –certainly not all of them – so I think the evidence is quite strong. Richard Wiseman actually replicated it, got the same results as me and then claimed he hadn't, and most people who have looked at my work and his work have concluded that he was actually *replicating* it rather than *refuting* it [**FT275:52**]. But the fact is that even if I did 10 or 20 papers on different dogs, the sceptics would then say, "Oh well it hasn't been independently replicated" – and, of course, I can't independently replicate my own work. It wouldn't make any difference; they wouldn't read the papers anyway, because they're not interested in the actual data. And most people who've got dogs that know when their owners are coming home don't read the papers either, because they don't need to prove it – they know it happens, they see it on a regular basis. So it's in a kind of limbo, because here's a phenomenon widely replicated, widely known, happens with millions of dogs every day. Scientific studies show it happens, and yet within the scientific world they either ignore the data or simply deny it because it doesn't fit in: it's an anomaly from the point of view of the materialist paradigm. And again, any reader of *FT* will be well aware of the way that anomalies are routinely dismissed simply because they don't fit in.



**ABOVE:** Star telepathic performer Jaytee and his owner Pamela Smart. **BELOW:** Jaytee's was one of many cases featured in Rupert's 1999 book *Dogs That Know When Their Owners Are Coming Home*.

**NAHM FOUND THAT THERE ARE MANY CASES OF TERMINAL LUCIDITY IN HUMANS. IT'S MOST NOTICEABLE IN PEOPLE WHO'VE HAD DEMENTIA**

Another classic experiment that gets a lot of people talking is looking at 'the sense of being stared at', which is really easy for people to replicate (see **FT378:59**). But are critics of the experiment not trying it for themselves?

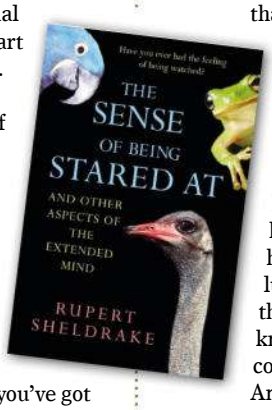
"Or if they do and they see that people do turn round, sceptics will just say, yes, they did turn round, but it's just a coincidence. So, again, one is dealing with an entrenched belief system. But for me the interesting thing is to try and find out more about how it happens. Just a couple of weeks ago I published a new paper on the subject called "Directional Scopæsthesia and Its Implications For Theories of Vision" in the *Journal of Scientific Exploration*: people can tell when they're being stared at from behind, but the question is how does it work? Is it a vague sense of unease followed by searching at random until they find someone looking at them, or is it directional? Do people turn and look straight at the person looking at them? I've looked at 960 case histories in this paper and in the majority its directional – people turn and look straight at the person looking at them. And the same thing happens with animals. If an animal is looking at somebody, they turn and look straight at the animal. For example, a woman in Australia who is very keen on koala bears used to go out in the forest looking for them, and they're very hard to see. She then found a new method,

ETIENNE GILFILLAN

**LEFT:** Rupert Sheldrake has recently been researching terminal lucidity in animals.

which worked much better. She just sort of stopped, very quietly waiting until she felt she was being looked at and turned to what was looking at her – and there would be a koala. A lot of people have found that if they stare at their dog or cat or at a wild animal, the animal will turn and look back at them. So I think this phenomenon is very deep-seated in animal nature and I think it evolved in the context of predator-prey relations, where a prey animal that could feel the look of a hidden predator would tend to survive better than one that couldn't.

"Any naturalist will probably have experienced this time and time again, when they come across the animal they're looking at and as they start watching it, it's off straight away. We interviewed more than 30 wildlife photographers as part of this study and they spend their whole life looking at wildlife, and almost all of them said, yes, of course this happens. We also interviewed dozens of hunters, and again they say the same thing. If you stare at the animal, it is going to run away. You have to look at them out of the corner of your eye, and if you've got them in your rifle sight you have to shoot fast; you can't just keep looking at them because they realise that you're looking at them and disappear. So for practical people who actually observe animals in the wild there was no dispute about this happening: they've seen it so many times they take it for granted.


Have you ever had the feeling of being watched?
THE SENSE OF BEING STARED AT
AND OTHER ASPECTS OF THE EXTENDED MIND
RUPERT SHELDRAKE

## NEW DIRECTIONS

I asked Rupert about one of his new fields of research: terminal lucidity in pets. What, I wondered, had led him to that?

Firstly, I got interested in reports of human terminal lucidity. It's always happened, but until it was given a name by Michael Nahm people didn't recognise it. It's a bit like near-death experiences. They've always happened, but when Raymond Moody gave them the name, suddenly everyone realised that this was happening. So when it's got a name, it becomes recognisable. What Nahm found was that there are many cases of terminal lucidity in humans. It's most noticeable in people who've had dementia for several years, so they don't know who anyone is and they don't know what's going on. And then a few hours or a few days before they die, suddenly they become quite lucid. They know who people are, they know they're dying, they remember things that have happened in the past.

So it's called terminal lucidity because it's lucidity and it happens at the end of life.

"I got additionally interested in this phenomenon because I had a brother who had dementia and I visited him shortly before he died, and he was in a state of complete lucidity. I hadn't seen him like that for years and suddenly I knew that we were in direct contact. He was really present. And shortly afterwards, he died. That made me particularly interested in it, and I'm interested in that because of morphic resonance. According to morphic resonance, memories are not stored in the brain. Our brains are more like a TV receiver that picks up transmissions from the past by resonance rather than a video recorder which has everything stored within it. And the usual view of Alzheimer's is that people lose their memory because the brain decays, and that means the memories are wiped out because they must be in the brain. I think what's happening is that the memories aren't wiped out, but the ability to retrieve them, or recall them is impaired. Now why people should suddenly have this surge of lucidity before they die I don't know, but it just seems to happen. And what it shows is that the memories can't be stored in the brain, because they wouldn't be able to come back if they'd all been wiped out by Alzheimer's.

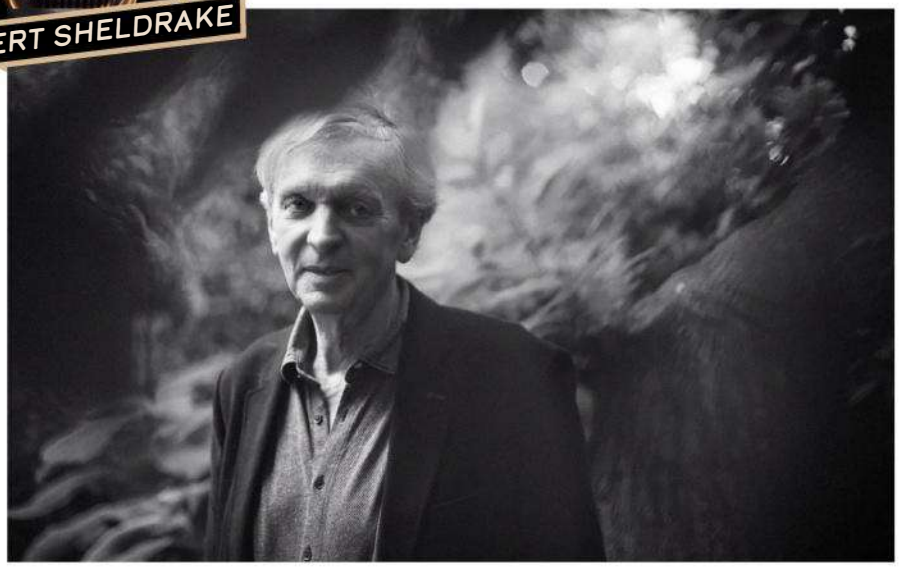
"I have a large collection of stories about animals and I have a big database of about 6,000 stories of unexplained abilities of animals and another 6,000 or so of human unexplained abilities with 70 or 80 categories, so this is in a sense a kind of fortean exercise. I collect these stories that people write in with. I have a research assistant, Pam Smart, who has worked with me for nearly 30 years and she maintains the database and classifies the stories. So when I got interested in terminal lucidity I looked at our own database, and we have a category for animals and dying animals, and I found we already had hundreds of cases describing dying animals, and I made appeals through social media for further stories. So then with Michael Nahm I wrote this paper called "Experiences of Dying Animals: Parallels With End-of-Life Experiences in Humans", which shows that dying animals also have a surge of energy and clarity before they die. One of the most common categories in that paper is the last goodbye. They know they're dying and they go and quite clearly say goodbye to members of the family and then they die. So there's a kind of lucidity about knowing they're dying and there's also a surge of energy, sometimes called the last rally, which seems to be a common feature of both human and animal end-of-life experiences. And as far as I know, no one has studied end-of-life experiences in animals. Thousands, millions of people have actually seen them and lots of vets are familiar with this, because they're often around when animals are dying from euthanasia, but no one had brought this together and tied it in with human terminal lucidity. And I think this tells us something about the dying process both in animals and in people: something deeply instinctive enables animals and people to know when they're about to die and it seems to unleash, at least in some cases, a surge of energy and of clarity as if people are going to die in a state where they can say goodbye, put things in order and somehow come to a closure; and then they die, rather than just fading away.

And are there any new projects he's really itching to get started on?

"In Cambridge, before I started on morphic resonance, I worked on plant hormone production and I showed that the main plant hormone, auxin, chemically known as indole acetic acid, is produced by dying cells. I first published it in 1968, but most people at the time just couldn't accept that

FORT TALK

RUPERT SHELDRAKE



ETIENNE GILFILLAN

**LEFT:** Rupert Sheldrake in 2024. **BELOW:** The paranoid schizophrenic assailant who attacked him in 2008.

dying cells could produce a hormone. During lockdown I revisited this whole literature and I found that since then people have gone on trying to prove it's produced by a biosynthetic pathway, but over and over again they run into the ground – but they've got a huge amount of detail, and when I put this together with the original dying cell theory it all fitted like the pieces of a jigsaw. And so I wrote a review article, which was published in the *Journal of Experimental Botany*, called "The Production of Auxin By Dying Cells". I wasn't quite sure how this would be received by the peer-reviewers and the editor, but they loved it and I got very good feedback from them. The editor then asked if I'd mind if they promoted it to their most prestigious category, the Darwin review. So there's a sense that those loose ends from all those years ago were tied up.

"I also worked on a theory of cellular rejuvenation when I was at Cambridge, and, again, the theory I put forward was not widely accepted at the time as it didn't fit the kind of genetic control model, but a lot of subsequent research has supported it. And so again I wrote a review article bringing that together which is published in the *The Proceedings of the Royal Society B* called "Cellular Senescence, Rejuvenation and Potential Immortality". So what I'm doing at the moment is trying to organise new research on morphic resonance, particularly in learning in nematode worms, as is there is already evidence from experiments that does look very like morphic resonance. If they learn to be attracted to a particular chemical which is associated with food, their descendants will do the same. It's a form of epigenetic inheritance, but I think epigenetic inheritance involves a strong element of morphic resonance and it's a very topical thing in biology at the moment. And I'm designing experiments that could tease apart a purely molecular epigenetic inheritance from morphic resonance in experiments with nematode worms. I'm trying to get that done soon, but I can't do it at home because I don't have a nematode worm laboratory. When I tried to do this kind of research with fruit flies I ran into serious problems with my wife, who just didn't want me having a room full of fruit flies in the house! I have found a lab that might be able to do it and I've already got results from a prestigious lab that's done some preliminary tests that are very encouraging.

> "MORPHIC RESONANCE AND AND THE SENSE OF BEING STARED AT ARE PROBABLY THE MAIN AREAS I'M FOCUSING ON AT THE MOMENT"

"And I'm very keen to pursue this research on the feeling of being stared at, because this directional study narrows down how it might be explained in relation to vision and the nature of vision – and this is low hanging fruit in the sense that almost everyone's experienced it. It's a very simple phenomenon, it has a good evolutionary basis, it happens with animals as well and it tells us something about the nature of vision. But no one has really tried to find out what's really going on, and so this is an area of research I'm trying to develop further. I've developed an app, which we're going to launch soon, where people can train themselves, I hope, to get better at it. That's just one new research avenue I'm pursuing with this. So morphic resonance and the sense of being stared at are probably the main areas I'm focusing on at the moment."

## BRUSH WITH DEATH

Finally, I had to ask about the bizarre incident in 2008 when he was speaking in the US and was stabbed (see **FT236:5**).

"I was giving a talk at a conference in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on consciousness, and just after the talk – there were 400-500 people in the room, as it was a big lecture theatre – I was stabbed in the leg by a Japanese assailant. It was a very serious wound, it almost got me in the femoral artery. I lost a lot of blood, but luckily I recovered, and the man was charged with attempted murder, but was found not guilty on grounds of insanity. He was a paranoid schizophrenic and he thought he was hearing voices. He read about me in Japan and was convinced these voices were being implanted telepathically, and since I was a kind of world expert on telepathy he booked a ticket to America and registered for the conference and came to it. And the day before he stabbed me he accosted me in the corridor and he said 'I'm hearing these voices, take them away.' And so I said, well, I'm terribly sorry, but I can't do that, and I think you need to talk to a psychiatrist or even a priest if you're going to find an answer to this. If I could help you, I would… but I can't help. It emerged during the trial that he then started having hallucinations of me telling him to disembowel himself ritually by Hari Kiri at the conference. And so his defence in the murder trial was that he was trying to kill me in self-defence, because I was trying to kill him by planting the idea of Hara Kiri.

"It's very sad, because he was suffering terribly from this paranoid schizophrenia and he spent three years in jail before being deported to Japan. But he was a lone individual who was severely disturbed, not part of a conspiracy to get me. I mean, it's not as if the sceptics had hired a hitman or something! I don't think they had anything to do with it, certainly not on any conscious level; I mean, they may have helped create a kind of field of hostility towards me that he might have picked up on, but that's purely speculative…"

- For previous interviews with Rupert Sheldrake, see **FT37:4-21, 286:38-40.** For our 'Building a Fortean Library' entry on *A New Science of Life*, **see FT353:52-53.**

- For lots more information about Rupert Sheldrake's latest projects, plus audio, video, online courses and experiments and much more – including the forthcoming app – visit sheldrake.org

# The Hong Kong tiger mystery

**JON DOWNES attempts to get to the bottom of a curious tale concerning an out-of-place tiger in wartime Hong Kong…**

Some time ago, Bob Rickard sent me a photograph he'd taken during a family trip to Hong Kong in January 2014. It shows a smoke-blackened and rather moth-eaten tiger skin hanging in the Tin Hau temple in Stanley Town on the southern part of Hong Kong island. Tin Hau – also known as 'Mazu', the Chinese guardian god of seafarers, fishermen and sailors – is an immensely popular deity throughout Southeast Asia. What the skin of a tiger is doing in a temple dedicated to things of the sea is a mystery, but it is not the only mystery surrounding this unfortunate animal.

What few people remember is that the raid on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 was only one of a series of co-ordinated attacks against US territories in the Philippines, Wake Island and Guam, as well as parts of the Dutch East Indies and Singapore, Malaya and Hong Kong, which were – at the time – British colonies. The battle for Hong Kong was hard fought, but the result was inevitable. The British colonial officials, led by Governor Mark Young, surrendered on Christmas Day, resulting in four years of horror for the tiny British colony.

The Japanese army of occupation routinely used rape, murder, torture and even cannibalism as tactics of war, and some truly horrific events are recorded in the history books. Whereas captured soldiers were sent by the Japanese to internment camps in the New Territories and the mainland, the civilian population was interned in Stanley Prison, on the shores of Tai Tam Bay.

BOB RICKARD

*Many internees believed the tiger had come from a travelling circus*

Like many boys of my generation, I grew up with World War II as a defining element in my life, even though it had ended 14 years before I was born. As a boy, I had always been interested in stories of Prisoner of War camps and their civilian equivalents, and it is interesting to note how the books written relatively soon after the war claim that the internees behaved in a 'stiff upper lip' and gentlemanly fashion, as if the POW camp was just an extension of the senior dorm at a minor public school. However, having been a resident of such a dormitory, I would say that such behaviour was probably quite ungentlemanly. I was interested to read in *Prisoner of The Turnip Heads* (1994) by George Wright-Nooth, that the behaviour of the internees at Stanley Internment Camp, at least, was as self-serving and petty as one would imagine when several thousand disparate people are caged together without enough food.

In the May of 1942, rumours started going around the camp population that they were being visited by a very unlikely intruder. Geoffrey Emerson, in his book, *Hong Kong Internment 1942-1945: Life in the Japanese Civilian Camp at Stanley*, writes: "In May 1942 one of the most unusual events of the internment years occurred. Although hardly an event of great importance, it is of great interest. For weeks there had been rumours in the Camp that a tiger was roaming around at night. As rumours were always prevalent, most internees refused to believe such a 'preposterous' tale. Therefore, it came as a great surprise when a male tiger weighing more than 200lb was killed just outside the Camp by a party of Japanese gendarmes, Chinese and Indian guards. The *Hong Kong News* of 21 May 1942 reported that the tiger weighed about 240lb (109kg), was three feet (90cm) high and six feet (1.8m) long with a 19-inch (48cm) tail. Some of the Indian guards reported that they had also seen the tiger's mate and two cubs, but these were never found."

Two photographs were taken, one of which – bizarrely – was credited to Lady May Ride, a doyenne of Hong Kong society for decades. She was the wife of the indomitable Australian war hero Sir Lindsay Ride, who, after escaping from the military internment camp at Sham Shui Po, spent the rest of the war in Chungking, where he formed and commanded the British Army Aid Group, a paramilitary organisation helping escapees from occupied Hong Kong, while gathering military intelligence. The *Hong Kong News* – which was an English language propaganda sheet, published by the occupying Japanese – claimed that not only was the photograph her property, but had been taken with her camera. The idea that an internee, no matter how high up the pecking order, of a repressively brutal regime would be allowed her own camera and access to a dark room is also unthinkable. So what happened?

**LEFT:** The photo of the tiger pelt taken by Bob Rickard in 2014.

I have always assumed that these claims were printed by the Japanese to cast doubt on Lady May's loyalty to the crown. I first heard about the tiger in a book called *The Hong Kong Countryside*, written in 1952 by Dr Geoffrey Herklots, and when, upon reading various books about Chinese folklore, I discovered that at one time it was believed that the appearance of a tiger in an area where one had not been seen was an omen that there was about to be a "New" Emperor. I formulated an amusing scenario whereby the Japanese had slaughtered some poor, unfortunate circus animal to carry out a crude, but effective, piece of psychological warfare. The God-Emperor Hirohito would replace the King-Emperor George VI, and the Chinese community would accept this, because the tiger told them so.

Upon reading George Wright-Nooth's book many years later, I learnt that he and other internees believed the tiger had come from a travelling circus somewhere on the island. This could well be corroborative support for my theory. However, there is no doubt that Hong Kong is well within the historical range of the South China tiger (*Panthera tigris amoyensis*) and there were confirmed tiger reports from the Colony as late as 1948 and unconfirmed ones up until the last few years.

But none of this explained who took the photograph, and why? Or why the pelt of a fierce land animal ended up in a 1767 temple dedicated to a sea goddess; or why there were various other strange, out of place animals, including a 'wolf' reported on the island at the same time…

**JON DOWNES** is the director of the Centre for Fortean Zoology.

# A positive future for forteans

**Things may look bad, but if we accept the anomalous and embrace the quest, argues PHIL SMITH, then the future is bright – it's fortean...**

As a regular reader of *Fortean Times* since the mid-1990s, I have noted recent articles and letters describing the hostile conditions for forteana at present. I want to argue that the opposite is the case: that there has never been a better time to be a fortean; nor a time when the world needed its forteans more.

The conditions are complex, of course. Factors include the accumulated working of mass media and Spectacle (in the Situationist sense) for over a century, eroding the stability of things and steadily replacing the production of solid commodities with their representations. The emergence of digital technologies accelerated this 'spectacularisation', removing the textual authority or 'media of record' once preserved and protected by monks, scribes, journalists and not a few blinkered bigots. More recently (I am drawing on experiences of the UK, US, China and Russia rather than elsewhere) there has been a gradual morphing of a capitalist (and state capitalist) society of production into a neo-feudalist one. This is partly the result of neo-liberalism's exhaustion. Which is ironic, as neo-liberalism's key text, Hayek's *The Road To Serfdom*, was meant to warn against the dangers to freedom posed by planned economies, but now reads more like a manifesto for our criminal-fiscal overlords.

The combined effects of these projects (empowered by centuries-long colonial extraction, desiccated rationalism and ecological depredation) is a massive rupture in reality. Distinct from conspiracy theory's basic thesis – that things are not what they seem – the real problem is that *things are not what they are*. Whether that be COP28 serving as an oil trading forum or the crimes-in-plain-sight of the light entertainment industry, there is little attempt at deception. The unreality of what exists is there for all to see. Of course there have always been hypocrites in power and contradictions in the creeds of the authoritative (political, religious or cultural), but that is not what this is. This is a sum effect of extraordinary technological, economic and cultural forces being brought to bear on reality for decades.

**ABOVE:** Ong's Hat, New Jersey, in the 1970s: a ghost town in the Jersey Pine Barrens or a gateway to other dimensions?

*We can make our own quests; forge our own integrities within ambiguity*

Now we have a war in Europe that almost everyone seems to have lost interest in because it plays out too slowly; it does not conform to the conventions of a three-act Hollywood blockbuster; so, *pace* Baudrillard, it isn't happening. Of course, *contra* Baudrillard, it is happening, but it is *as if* it wasn't. And if you don't control the *as if* right now, you are nothing.

This is fruitful ground for QAnon-style paranoia (see **FT371:32-39**), but it is also where a fortean approach is uniquely pertinent. For unlike the paranoid style, a fortean does not over-explain. We question the propriety of "the proper thing to wear, for a while", but are open to entertaining reasonable hypotheses based on anomalies. In a culture without reliable records, the stimulation of intuition accorded by anomalous ripples in conventional discourse is far more useful than old-style rational analysis.

Of course many neo-feudal political masters rub their hands in glee at the possibilities for obfuscation. In the short term, given their resources and self-serving narratives, things have gone well for them. In the medium term, they pull the rug from under their own feet. The repositories of malign authority (ecstatic churches, shock jocks, conspiracists, incel theorists) benefit the new feudal lords by splintering consensus certainties, but, in the end, all powers (liberal or authoritarian) depend on some hard leverage, and they are giving that up.

As the politicisation of the algorithmic-irrational (see Gary Lachman's adroit 2018 book, *Dark Star Rising* on the movements around Trump; see **FT369:40-46**) loses it momentum, and Pepe the Frog retreats under his original comic stone, the unstable ground of the new culture becomes more affordant for experiments, which can do better than copy the old binary of real/unreal. Whether we take the red or blue pill, whether in a hologram or in Morpheus's claustrophobic steampunky *Nebuchadnezzar*, we can choose our own reality. We can dwell imaginatively in the flux of Spectacle and still turn up for work on Monday morning, or we can arrive at work on Monday morning to play out, in the gaps in that reality, our myth quest of choice. The real Matrix is full of glitches; attend to its details and portals open up.

These shifts in reality are not self-evident. When *everything* shifts sideways, you need a strong

marker to navigate by. Many have felt the shift, but carry on regardless; old routines still seem to work. Those of a fortean persuasion, however, attuned to the anomalous and assuming the weirdest, are better positioned than most to devise their own realities. Where dogmatism or cynicism was formerly rewarded, ambiguity has new value. Where gaming was previously deployed as manipulation, 'the game' is now a field rather than a set of instructions; the board and not the rules predominates. As sorcerer Julian Karswell says in *Night of the Demon* (1957): "I always preferred sliding down the snakes to climbing up the ladders". We all now have that choice, not just the sorcerers.

We can make our own quests; forge our own integrities within ambiguity. There are useful examples even in the less reputable examples of questing. Take the protagonists of the TV series *Hellier*, 'paranormal investigators' off in search of mine goblins (or are they aliens?) in Kentucky; the best they come up with is a possibly significant tin can. Yet what is precious in its episodes are the unfolding coincidences, the threads that weave together disparate sources (even when the connections are observably mistaken). Or take the exponents of vision questing and their pursuit of objects and esoteric webs of meaning, as described in a book like Giuseppe La Rosa's *The Chronicle of Meonia* (which I was inspired to read after spotting a review of it in **FT341:55** – "best read with tongue firmly in cheek and a pinch of salt to hand" – by Andy Roberts). Finishing the book, I was left with the impression that the events of the quest were unnecessary fabrications; yet, if we remove that manipulation and get rid of all 'mediums' and 'guides' (and do those parts for ourselves), but hang on to the places, the things, the narratives and the performances... then there are plenty of wonders out there, physical and nebulous. There is no need to deceive ourselves or anyone else to genuinely quest.

There are plenty more good examples: from role-playing games to LARPing; particularly where the edge of the game and the beginning of the everyday world is where the gameboard is marked. The Ong's Hat phenomenon repays study; an art project cum collaborative fiction concocted by four artists, it was originally distributed through the bulletin boards of the early Internet, snail mail art networks, 'faxlore' and small zines.[1] Its fiction wove cutting edge physics with experimental communal living, a real place (Ong's Hat in the New Jersey Pine Barrens, where else?) and access to alternative worlds – Joseph Matheny's *Ong's Hat: The Beginning* (2002) is a good introduction – which then span off into real world visits, conspiracy narratives, and artworks like Limelight's podcast drama *The Incident At Ong's Hat* (2023, available on BBC Sounds). Undoubtedly, some went searching in New Jersey in the paranoid belief that the remnants of an experimental camp were really there; but can't we read the Ong's Hat myth as something that questors – in the spirit of pranky legend-tripping rather than investigative journalism – can insert ourselves into, fictionally, but in real places?

The crucial factor here is that the quest within an uneven reality is subjective. The psycho-nautical adventures of the 1960s and 1970s, shorn of their manipulators, are becoming relevant again (Erik Davis's 2019 book *High Weirdness* is no bad guide). Given the volatility of the new environment, I do not agree with those who say FT is too sceptical. We need scepticism. This is the worst possible moment for gullibility (you will be burned by bad actors); more importantly though, sceptical disenchantment of fakery is a form of re-enchantment. FT's SD Tucker is an excellent example of this; he shows the irrationalism, undoes the nonsense and hypocrisy, but never dismisses the wonder. Likewise, the late James Randi's exposés of the likes of Uri Geller were enchantments; they were wonders in themselves, opening up connections to covert semi-magical operations and manipulations involving security services, academia and light entertainment. As with *Hellier*, connections and coincidences are what the enchantment – or 'enchainment' – consists of. A quest is less a solo trajectory than a stitch that connects us questors to the grounds – places, stories and other agencies – of our quests.

A truly shadowy anti-example of self-determined questing would be something like 'The Finders', the 1970s secretive cult whose 'gamecaller' (former USAF Master Sergeant Marion Pettie), would set his followers numerous quests as part of what one of the players, Tobe Terrell, called "the mind-expanding and consciousness-raising experiments from his [Pettie's] tireless imagination".[2] Opinions differ about just how far the CIA, who called off local law enforcement investigations of the group, manipulated the whole thing. There is, however, something to be learned, borrowed and repurposed from the quests set by Pettie; but to make anything worthwhile from such tasks, a founding principle of 'no gurus and no fans' is essential. To manipulate the questors or the conditions of the quest is to show a massive disrespect for a cosmos that is quite capable, even at its everyday level, of providing wonders without interference; we need to set our own quests, call our own games.

One positive example of the questing I am advocating, sitting at the edge of science and wonders, is FT stalwart contributor Richard Freeman's cryptozoological searching for obscure beasts like the Mongolian Death Worm. Only very occasionally can Richard bring back from his expeditions concrete evidence of a direct or even indirect encounter with a mystery animal. Yet he always has a rich bag of experiences, witness accounts, place-tales and local yarns; all the time expertly sensitive to the way that sightings connect to forms of 'high strangeness' (about which we have a new book of Richard's to look forward to shortly): UFOs with bigfoot, ghosts with anomalous cats. While Richard often crosses continents and oceans on his quests, there are similar wonders in our own backyards; a few yards from my own back gate I can show you where guinea pigs live in a WWII air raid shelter and where ectoplasm oozing out of the walls of the Spiritualist Church is fed on by ants.

At the beginning of his now-classic cosmicist tale 'The Call of Cthulhu', HP Lovecraft ponders the temporary comfort that humans enjoy due to our inability to draw together the sum of knowledge: "We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of disassociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality... we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age". Lovecraft is uncharacteristically optimistic here; he supposes that we have a choice. For we have no choice now but to welcome a new dark age. This is no cause for pessimism. The classical certainties that have prevailed since the Renaissance are fading, and the bright cultural light of the Dark Ages (think *Mabinogion*, think the Mystery Cycles, think *Morte D'Arthur*) will shine again, unblinkered by rationalist inhibitions and reductive thinking, an illumination far more conducive to forteana than any cold and steely Enlightenment.

If we want to live, rather than just-about-manage under techno-subjection, then we should assume our irrational and unrealistic freedom to quest.

**NOTES**

**1** See Joseph Matheny, *Ong's Hat: The Beginning*, Oregon, Wildcard Interactive, 2002; Micahel Kinsella, *Legend-Tripping Online: Supernatural Folklore and the Search for Ong's Hat*, Mississippi, University Press of Mississippi, 2011.

**2** Tobe Terrell, *The Gamecaller*, independently published, 2009.

**PHIL SMITH** is is the author of *Goblin Queens and Qualia Knights* (Triarchy Press) and *Albion's Eco-Eerie: TV and Movies of the Haunted Generations* (Temporal Boundary Press).

THE WORLD OF STRANGE PHENOMENA

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# The lore of landscape – and more

**Gordon Rutter** examines a pricey academic text, and finds it an excellent and deeply informative exploration of Folk Horror in all its many forms

## The Routledge Companion to Folk Horror

*ed. Robert Edgar & Wayne Johnson*

Routledge 2023

Hb 472pp, £215, ISBN 9781032042831
ebook £43.99

If the following have any meaning for you then you are probably part of this book's target audience: The 'Unholy Trinity', *Witchfinder General*, *The Blood on Satan's Claw*, *The Wicker Man*, Folk Horror, Urban Wyrd, Andy Paciorek, Adam Scovell.

But before you rush out and buy it, some warnings – the hardback list price is £215 and it's an academic text, written in an appropriate style, with footnotes and references. On the plus side, the Kindle version is a mere £43.99. And one final warning – there are plenty of spoilers for some of the works discussed.

So what is it all about?

Folk Horror deals with the landscape, its folklore and superstitions, and it has been championed as a specific genre by the likes of Andy Paciorek, Adam Scovell and Mark Gatiss.

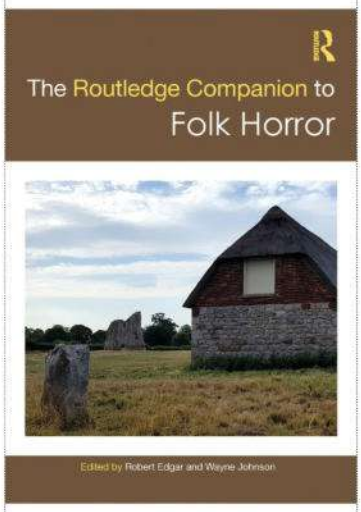
In this *Companion* there are 40 separate entries, each roughly 10 pages long, by individual authors; each entry is a standalone paper with its own DOI number – a permanent link to an online copy, found on most research papers nowadays. This approach does of course lead to some repetition in parts.

The book is divided into five sections, the first of which, "Origins and Histories", looks at, naturally, the starting point. Many may put this at 2010 with Mark Gatiss and his *A History of Horror* documentary series, where he uses *Witchfinder*, *Satan's Claw* and *Wicker Man* as the foundation of Folk Horror (the 'Unholy Trinity'). Here we have papers pushing it further and further back. Tolkien, MR James, Walter Scott and others are used as examples, and further back still.

Some of the motifs used (the old gods) derive from BC and they have subsequently been brought in to populate Folk Horror projects.

Ultimately there are many aspects that are part of Folk Horror which predate the recognition of the genre, and as soon as someone puts a date forward then someone else will offer an earlier alternative.

The 'Unholy Trinity', though,




seems a good starting point with its codification in Gatiss's 2010 series; this allows for proto-Folk Horror from whatever period you wish.

Section two is entitled "Folk Horror Landscape and Relics". This gives us a second entry on MR James, but this is more a catalogue of his works identifying those with specific Folk Horror elements.

Moving into the Urban Wyrd (Folk Horror in a more urban setting) we have "Mind the Doors!" a chapter looking at the London Underground as a Folk Horror location – no prizes for guessing one of the films discussed here (*Deathline,* if you are unfamiliar with it, features cannibals on the London Underground no less!).

> *They became an art form, albeit a grisly, death, disease and deformity-soaked art form*

A chapter on Queer Folk uses the phrase in its original, more general sense – queer being different from the 'normal', so it does include sexual identity/orientation, but also has Sergeant Howie as queer: in the setting of *The Wicker Man* he is different from the norms of the location he is in, the pagan Summerisle.

Part three is "Hauntology, Childhood and Nostalgia", the highlight of the book. This contains, for me, the stand-out chapter, by Andy Paciorek ("Yesterday's Memories of Tomorrow"). It is densely packed with information and does not waste several pages discussing definitions or basically giving episode guides.

It ranges widely from *Bagpuss* to Public Information Films, which, Paciorek tells us, "in the 1970s and 1980s … became something of an art form, albeit a grisly, death, disease and deformity-soaked art form. The UK's Generation X learned to fear frisbees near pylons, fireworks, mats on polished floors, rabies, getting trapped in abandoned fridges and, of course, pools of dark and lonely water..." I'll bet that quote brought memories back for some of you!

A comparison between *Ghostwatch* and *Host* (the latter spoiler-free) from Diane Rodgers in "Ghosts in the Machine", and several sections on Folk Horror and children's programming, evoking memories of the whole output of Smallfilms (*Noggin the Nog*, *The Clangers*, *Ivor the Engine*; indeed, virtually anything narrated by Oliver Postgate).

The authors all do very well in producing waves of nostalgia – and nostalgia is one of the links in the 'Folk Horror Chain' developed by writer and film-maker Adam Scovell.

Part four focuses on the importance of "Sound and Image in Folk Horror". As well as sounds associated with Folk Horror there are overviews of albums, performers and production companies – there's a whole chapter on Folk Horror in the work of Genesis!

Finally part five is "Regionality, Nationality, Transnationality". Satire and paganism are included here, as well as specific entries on Cornwall and Australia, and James Thurgill gives a good overview of the genre seen through the filter of Japanese film making.

The downside of the book (other than the price) includes some poor footnotes in the text. There are some typos and inconsistencies, for example a constant flip between *artefact* and *artifact*. Some writers use "works cited" and others use a bibliography for their references. And there are minor differences used in some of the referencing itself.

But these negative comments are nit-picking. This is an excellent book packed full of instructive and informative text.

Is it worth £215? No. Is it worth reading? Definitely.

★★★★★

# Beware battle-darts!

**Paula Dempsey** enjoys learning about how the early Middle Ages perceived the natural

## The Deorhord

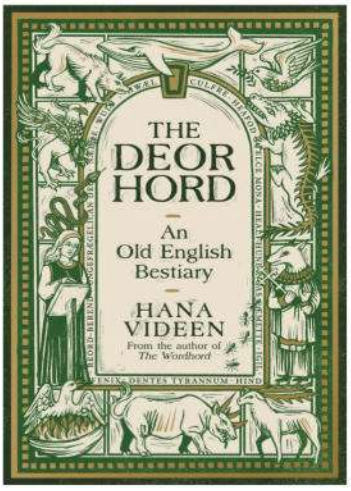
**An Old English Bestiary**

*Hana Videen*

Profile Books 2023

Hb, 342pp, £15.99, ISBN 9781800815797

Do you have foxes in your street? Are they welcome or a pest? Are raccoons disease-ridden dustbin raiders or cute trash pandas? Before taking us back to the Middle Ages Hana Videen invites us to consider what associations humans have ascribed to animals commonly seen in the modern urban environment, the fox and the raccoon. The stories we construct around them, the way we perceive them, while not what they actually are, can tell us a lot about our own view of the natural world. So it was with people living in the early Middle Ages who saw symbolism in their native fauna, especially animals as Christian metaphors, while being fascinated by strange animals from other lands. Some animals were good, some bad and some just spontaneously combusting chickens.




The entries are divided into a number of sections, The Baffling and The Extraordinary perhaps being of most interest to forteans. The most mundane creatures had much to teach our ancestors, however. The spider (*wæfer-gange* or weaver-walker) and its delicate web are both metaphors for human frailty. Should one receive a non-metaphorical spider bite, Videen offers a selection of folk remedies that may be of help.

Some of the animals described are so bizarre it's impossible to work out where the writers got their ideas from. Misinterpretation of travellers' tales, perhaps, or pure fantasy?

Water monsters, *nicors*, challenged both Beowulf and Alexander the Great. Videen suggests a possible link between *nicor* and the Neckinger, one of London's lost rivers of which Deptford Creek is part. Even modern mudlarks find the area disconcerting, apparently. You may dodge the *nicor* only to die at the fangs of a teeth tyrant, while the street-maker may be an exaggerated and belligerent form of the common badger, fox or hedgehog. Beware its battle-darts!

I didn't expect to find elephants or phœnixes in an Old English bestiary, but they are there to remind us that English trade routes extended well beyond northern Europe. Less surprisingly, there are wolves, ants and deer, whose name in Old English, *deor*, originally meant *animal* and was adapted by Videen as the book's title.

Each animal has its own wordhord, a list of the new words in Old English that the reader has learned from that chapter, with advice on pronunciation. By the end of the book, I really felt I was beginning to understand some words, and able to make a fair stab at pronunciation, although whether *g* is pronounced as *g* or *y*, and *f* as *f* or *v* is probably less arbitrary than it appeared to me.

I really liked this book. It entertains as much as it educates and contains much gentle humour. The perfect companion for armchair time travellers.

★★★★★

## Death and the Victorians

**A Dark Fascination**

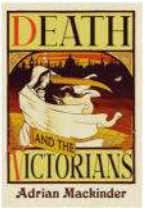
*Adrian Mackinder*

Pen & Sword 2024

Hb, 192pp, £25, ISBN 9781399082556

*Death and the Victorians* is "an exploration into the various ways the Victorians tried to make sense of death".

The book is split into chapters dealing with key death-related topics in Victorian society, such as bodysnatching, cemeteries, postmortem photography and Jack the Ripper.




For the seasoned fortean reader, many of these topics will be familiar and so this book is a primer rather than a tome offering any profound new interpretations.

My personal favourite sections of the book are those where Mackinder delves into Victorian literary and print culture.

His chapter on Victorian ghost stories revels in the work of Horace Walpole, Charles Dickens and Edgar Allan Poe, but there are also interesting discussions of lesser-known writings by Elizabeth Gaskell and Sheridan Le Fanu.

"Get Me a Murder a Day!", on the Victorian "tabloid" press and penny dreadfuls, is a chapter full of rich examples, from *The Barber of Fleet Street* to the no-doubt interminable (at c. 667,000 words!) *Varney the Vampire*.

A chapter on WT Stead, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* and Victorian agent provocateur, is a fascinating account of a man who also founded his own Spiritualist magazine, *Borderland*.

Although *Borderland* lasted only four years, it is perhaps a perfect illustration of Victorian society's fads and fashions, as well as its more philosophical preoccupations.

As Mackinder observes, the Victorian era was "a period of enormously significant cultural transition".

This sense of the era as one of profound and fast-paced change can lead to over-simplification, however, and there are a few points where Mackinder makes broad generalisations that could have been more deeply interrogated for interesting insight.

The idea that Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) "completely and irrevocably undermined traditional religious beliefs" is a common claim, but one recognised by many historians as far too simple.

The Oxford Movement had been challenging religious tradition in Britain since the 1830s, for example, and Protestantism itself was fragmented. Doctrine was already being questioned: *Origin* reinforced this tendency for some, while others slotted it comfortably into their existing belief system. As the book is sparsely referenced, it's often difficult to discern from where Mackinder draws the bulk of his information.

Although his very readable style draws us in, the resultant picture drawn of the Victorians – gawping at corpses or gathering in their hundreds to witness a potential ghost – sometimes comes inadvertently close to the mocking tone of Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918).

By the final pages, I wasn't entirely sure that we had fully understood how "Victorians tried to make sense of death". Certainly, we see that they were fascinated by it, but the deeper currents that drove this fascination – religious denomination, the spectre of disease – remain somewhat uncharted.

Jennifer Wallis

★★★

## Folk Gothic

*Dawn Keetley*

Cambridge University Press 2024

Pb, 78pp, £17, ISBN 9781009160896

Books from academic presses have become stupidly expensive, so many of them have now entered the market for shorter books at affordable prices.

Cambridge Elements books are slices of accessible scholarship, and the ones in the Gothic series have got off to a lively start.

Dawn Keetley's *Folk Gothic* focuses on the revival of so-called Folk Horror films from the 2010s, sustained by those crossover successes *Kill List* (2011) and *Midsommar* (2019). Both films wear their debt to the originating

*Wicker Man* (1973) heavily on their sleeves.

These films are typified by urbanites stumbling into ancient territories (forests, villages, stone circles) where the "old ways" predominate, out of time, and nasty doom lies in wait for those who transgress.

Keetley explores several in the genre and adds in some limit cases for discussion. There's also a welcome chapter on the short stories of Eleanor Scott and EF Benson from the 1920s to root the genre a little deeper.

Keeping a breezy pace, there isn't much context explored for why these groups of narratives emerge when they do, and I also missed a discussion of national contexts, but then Keetley also recently co-edited *Folk Horror: New Global Pathways* (2023) (see **FT436:51**), which does that job more extensively.

Keetley's thoughts are good on the blurry boundary between folk tales, folklore and Gothic tall stories – that fortean zone of uncertainty occupied by the genre. Yet the book is also driven by an argument that suggests the familiar, short-hand term "folk horror" is too loose and unrigorous. It wants to argue instead for her own "Folk Gothic" tag.

It's a question of establishing a spectrum, Keetley suggests.

Horror comes at you with embodied monsters and murderous intent in a clear moral universe.

Folk Gothic, at the other end of the spectrum, is quieter, more irresolute, suffused with a sense that certain places or locales operate on a wholly other logic, dethroning human authority with a hooded, unknowable intent.

At this end lies work like Alan Garner's *The Owl Service* (book in 1967, TV adaptation in 1969-70). All of Garner's work is marked by the doom of mythic repetition that overtakes its central characters. This frame is familiar from critical work on weird fiction and ecological horror.

At times this argument can risk falling into that academic mode of dispute over minor definitional disagreement, and "Folk Gothic" can sometimes feel like a bid to stake out a terminological claim in a crowded cultural field.

But there is value in how Keetley characterises the range of emotional tones and moods in this fertile territory.

**Roger Luckhurst**

★★★★

## Hunt for the Shadow Wolf

**The lost history of wolves in Britain and the myths and stories that surround them**

*Derek Gow*

Chelsea Green 2024

Hb, 256pp, £20, ISBN 9781645020424

How do you tell the tracks of wolves from those of large feral dogs in a forest? It's easy. Wolves move in straight lines, with complete confidence: dogs ramble and weave. Wolves, in other words, belong there, as recent introductions like dogs and humans do not.

The wolves know it: I've never felt smaller than when a Kazakh wolf looked me contemptuously up and down, dismissed me with a proprietorial toss of its head, and loped off across the steppe.

Wolves move with similar poise and authority through our myths and our psyches. We might think we've killed them all, but they're there, still in charge, in our dreams, our stories and our place names.

Derek Gow, the author of this thrilling, prescient, snarling, howling account of wolf-lore, is best known as a conservationist and an advocate of re-wilding. And indeed this book ends with a compelling argument for the reintroduction of wolves to Britain.

No, they won't eat hikers. Yes, they might eat sheep, but there are far too many sheep anyway, and they're an ecological disaster. Yes, they'll kill deer, and thank goodness, for deer are wholly out of control in many areas.

At first blush it might seem strange to squeeze between two covers both a biologically sophisticated argument for reintroduction and a succulent cornucopia of legend, superstition and anecdote. But it's not.

Though Gow doesn't put it quite like this, the juxtaposition powerfully makes the point that since wolves are in our heads and our living history anyway, their shadows slinking accusingly through our subconscious, we'll be much more satisfactory, better integrated humans if the real things galloped proudly through our woods instead. It'd be a sort of exorcism.

But you needn't, and probably shouldn't, get so psychoanalytical.

Read the book to know that a dried wolf penis made into a ligature and given a man's name will stop him having sex until the ligature is undone, and that a wolf's severed paw relieves breast pain; for its survey of British werewolves; to discover just how good wolves are at digging up human corpses, and what to do

about it; to view Terminal 5 at Heathrow in a new light (for England's last wolf might have been done to death there); to learn about wolf-head trees, where wolves were hanged; to ponder, with Gow, why far-right politicians in Denmark demand, in the same breath, the banishment of "burqas and wolves", and to reflect on how very civilised wolves are compared to us.

Gow thinks that wolves survived in mainland Britain well into the 18th century. That's not long ago. They'll be back soon. It'd be wise (and certainly fascinating) to let Gow prepare you for their return.

**Charles Foster**

★★★★★

## Europe's Roswell

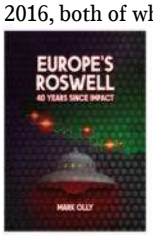
**40 Years Since Impact**

*Mark Olly*

Flying Disk Press 2023

Pb, 96pp, £7.75, ISBN 9798379283681

It is a mystery that Wales seems to attract Roswell-like crash incidents. These include the Berwyn crash of 23 January 1974, and the Pentyrch incident of 26 February 2016, both of which have gained




enthusiastic supporters who allege the authorities secretly collected the wreckage and whisked it away to Rudloe Manor, Britain's equivalent of Area 51.

Now Mark Olly, musician, historian, archæologist and lecturer, celebrates the 40th anniversary of a lesser known Welsh crash that occurred in woods near the village of Llanilar, one night in January 1983.

Basically, farmer Irwel Evans reported to the *Sunday Express* that he found strange metallic debris scattered over four of his fields, and that it was promptly taken away by police and RAF personnel. Reading this story, ufologist Gary Rowe and his "reconnaissance team" visited the farmer and found six small pieces of the debris.

Rowe did not reveal details of the case until 2000, and Olly produced a DVD about it in 2008. On visiting the locality for the DVD, Olly found Evans did not want to talk about the incident on-camera, and none of the local people were willing to say anything about it.

Rowe believes the debris, which consisted of two pieces of honeycomb foil and four pieces of shattered plate, has strong parallels with the Roswell case and proves extraterrestrial vehicles are visiting us.

It is strange that no other media reported this incident in 1983, and that it is all based on Evans's testimony.

The debris is said to have damaged trees, indicating that it fell from the sky, yet Rowe's team did not seem to take any photographs of this important piece of evidence.

One fragment was sent by Olly to Phenomena Research Australia in 2023, and their analysis concluded that it consisted of a low density aluminium foam, and was definitely of a terrestrial origin.

Another fragment sent to MUFON's Missouri laboratory, was found to consist of 94.6 per cent lanthanum, which is a malleable, silvery-white soft metal used as an additive to steel or to create nodular cast iron.

MUFON optimistically concludes "...it is not out of the realm of possibility that more than one group of beings could have found any number of aeronautical uses for this rare earth metal."

The hodgepodge of chapters leaves the reader with more questions than answers, and that's its best comparison with Roswell.

**Nigel Watson**

★★★

# The darker side of tourism

Why do people want to visit the sites of tragedy, atrocity and suffering? **Andy Paciorek** explores a study of their appeal

## I Am The Dark Tourist

**Messenger of Remembrance**

*HE Sawyer*

Headpress 2023

Pb, 316pp, £17.99, ISBN 9781915316172

A cursory glance at my bookshelves will reveal that I possess morbid curiosity – I'm someone who would readily visit more Dark Tourist destinations (except for those with blood sport/animal cruelty activity).

But why would I, or anybody, be interested in attending the sites of tragedy, atrocity, suffering?

The answers to this require long bouts of philosophical and psychological head-scratching, but in a practical sense we'd go because we can. Not only are we enabled to visit such places, but we are actively encouraged to do so by the caretakers of some of these sites.

How they market themselves to us is also a matter of considerable deliberation – an issue that HE Sawyer investigates in his follow-up to 2018's *I Am the Dark Tourist: Travels to the Darkest Sites on Earth*.

Whilst some people undoubtedly would consider Dark Tourists to be ambulance-chasing ghouls, and to some greater or lesser degree that could well be the case, obviously the numerous Dark Tourist sites would not wish to categorise their visitors as such or want to encourage pain-parasitic people.

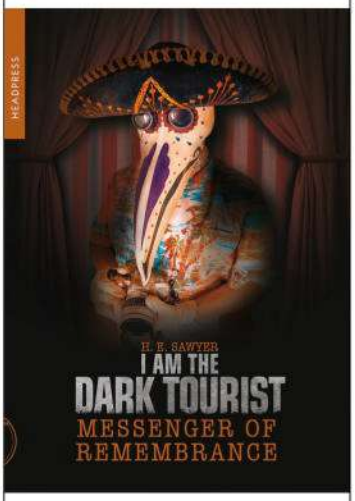
The subtitle of this book, "Messenger of Remembrance", relates to a statement issued by the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum declaring "the museum didn't consider itself an attraction, and that visiting tourists would be transformed into *messengers of remembrance*".

Sawyer endeavours to find out just what exactly such a messenger is, what the sites expect or require of their visitors and how their visit will *transform* them, how they act to achieve their aims and the impact that both visitors and caretaking authorities have upon sites.

He also questions the academic suggestion of designating such destinations as "Shadow Places", but it is clear the Holocaust casts a long shadow over both Dark Tourism generally and especially this book. The process of marketing significant sites casts its own dark shadow.

The author questions such matters as the controversial association between Auschwitz and Chelsea football club arising from the anti-Semitic chants and attitudes of a faction of fans, also the strife in London in locating its own proposed Holocaust memorial – both cases rife with intrigue and drama.

Other issues arise from wanting




increased footfall to such sites include the footfall itself – the general wear and tear of heavy attendance and how the experience and intended messages can be somewhat lost in large crowds, but also the appropriateness of other tourist industry factors – the presence of an ice cream kiosk close to the infamous *Arbeit Macht Frei* gates at Auschwitz springs to mind (the gates actually being a replica following the theft and retrieval of the original sign in 2009).

Other sites and events explored within the book include the felling and fate of the Edward Colston statue in Bristol, the great tragedy of the Grenfell tower block, the *Dia De Muertos* celebrations in Mexico and the suggested Museum of Death and Death Café at Brookwood Cemetery, the terminus of the long defunct Necropolis railway line.

There is an interesting aside from the heavier air that drifts through a lot of the book to be found in the visiting of places with an attraction that is rather unlikely to be seen and may not have existed at all in the first place.

The contrast here is between Loch Ness, which heavily promotes the lake monster Nessie, and Highgate Cemetery, which really does not want people visiting the graveyard with the intention of hunting vampires!

Sawyer is a very good writer; he engages in a conversational manner throughout the book, covering a lot of information and contemplating a lot of varying opinion, relaying it all in a very readable manner.

His thorough consideration of matters is indeed seasoned with some cynicism, which is not surprising bearing in mind some of the issues he encounters.

*Messenger of Remembrance* is sometimes an uncomfortable read and is challenging of various viewpoints, but that's understandable considering the subject matter. There is a dry wit that filters through that is engaging.

It's not a gazetteer nor a tour book – there are other titles available that serve this purpose; its audience instead would be people seeking to understand the attraction, marketing and nuances of Dark Tourism more deeply.

Although it is not an academic tome, it should be a must-read for scholars of tourism, particularly those studying the darker variety.

★★★★

## Muses No More

**Portraits of Occult Women**

*Una Maria Blyth*

Hexen Press 2023

Pb, 200pp, £25, ISBN 9782492143106

In the occult world, as in the art world, women have too often been seen simply as the muses of the (usually more famous) male practitioners. This book seeks to set them in their rightful place in the history of occultism.

The entries are organised in reverse order of death, beginning with Margot Adler, author of the seminal *Drawing Down the Moon*,

and moving back through Doreen Valiente, crucial in rewriting the rituals of Gardnerian Witchcraft, and Cameron, definitely a muse to Jack Parsons but also a brilliant occult artist and (albeit minor) actor. Two other significant occult artists included are the Australian "Witch of King's Cross" Rosaleen Norton, and Pamela Colman Smith, co-creator of the highly influential Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot. I'd have expected more women from the Golden Dawn. Apart from Pixie Smith, only Moina Mathers is here; where are Florence Farr, Annie Horniman and Maud Gonne?

The book doesn't just cover women in the Western Mystery Tradition; Theosophist Annie Besant is here, and Marie Laveau, the Voodoo queen of New Orleans. The earliest entry is the 17th-century Isobel Gowdie.

The problem is who isn't included. Blythe says she has left out some famous figures because "channelling their spirits made me sick", citing Dion Fortune's racism. Yes, some occultists were "deeply problematic" – but the answer, surely, is not to run away from them but to engage with them, unpleasant traits included.

Others who are missing include two remarkable women who have influenced many present-day occultists: the late Olivia Robertson, co-founder of the Fellowship of Isis, and Dolores Ashcroft-Nowicki, at 95 still the director of Servants of the Light.

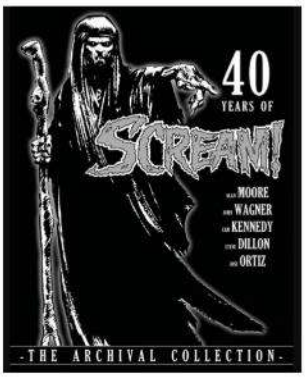
At the end of the book are rituals the author has channelled from each of the 17 women; the space would have been better devoted to more entries.

**Jay Vickers**

★★★

# COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

**STEVE TOASE** PRESENTS HIS LATEST PICKS FROM THE WORLD OF SEQUENTIAL ART




## 40 Years of Scream

*Various writers and artists*

Rebellion Comics

Hb, 464pp, £45, ISBN 9781837861071

I'm not even going to pretend to be objective with this review. It was 1983 and I was happily reading *Buster* and *Battle*, when a new comic arrived on the newsagent's shelves, filled with Victorian graverobbers, psychotic computers, and unpleasant twists, and overnight I had a new comic with which to terrify myself – *Scream*. Unfortunately, it was short-lived, only lasting 15 issues; but while that was frustrating for a seven-year-old comic fan, it does mean that this new volume from Rebellion Publishing can boast that it includes all of the stories originally published in *Scream*.

Here you will find murderous cats, Max the computer and The Thirteenth Floor (an early warning against AI), a contemporary Dracula, Kenny and his uncle Terry. For me, it's the one-shot single-page comics that make *Scream* stand out; and one in particular – 'Green Fingers' in issue three – had a huge influence on my own writing.

*40 Years of Scream* is excellent value, and an entertaining view into an important if short-lived part of Eighties children's comics.

## Death Strikes: The Emperor of Atlantis

*Dave Maass, Patrick Lay*

Berger Books

Hb, 128pp, £23.99, ISBN 9781506737300

Atlantis never sank beneath the waves. Sealed in his fortress tower, The Emperor makes announcements via The Drummer to ensure perpetual war. Outside the fortress, Death has had enough and goes on strike, leaving the huge numbers of the population killed in the conflict suspended between life and death. Life, portrayed as Pierrot, dances through the devastation while Worker and Soldier try to find meaning for themselves in the ruins of the carnage.

The artwork is gorgeous, while the story is by turns poignant, satirical, poetic and genuinely funny. This is allegory in the long tradition of works such as Orwell's *Animal Farm*, Kubin's *The Other Side*, and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.

Yet, there is another dimension here. The comic is an adaptation of the opera *Der Kaiser von Atlantis oder Die Tod-Verweigerung* (The Emperor of Atlantis or The Disobedience of Death), written in Theresienstadt concentration camp by librettist Peter Kein and composer Viktor Ullmann before their transportation and deaths at Auschwitz.

For some creators, adapting such a story to a comic might have involved treating the work as something so precious as to be left largely untouched, yet the team behind Death Strikes have used all their skills as storytellers to capture the furious satire and humour of the original opera while transposing it to a new medium. Yes, its origins make it more poignant and run like a thread through the story, but you should read this because it is an astonishingly powerful story in its own right.

## The Curie Society Vol. 2: Eris Eternal

*Anne Toole, Heather Einhorn, Adam Staffaroni*

MIT Press

Pb, 168pp, £21, ISBN 9780262544375

*Eris Eternal* continues the adventures of the Curie Society, a covert group of women working in STEM fields using their knowledge, abilities and skills to make the world a better place and protect the planet from rogue scientists. In this second volume, a series of strange events in Paris centres around the Commenciègerie, an organisation set up by Curie Society member Daksha to bring tech innovations by marginalised creators to market. Daksha's aims, though, appear to be under threat from a mysterious villain, and her fellow Curie Society members Simone, Taj and Maya embark on a globe-spanning quest to get to the bottom of things.

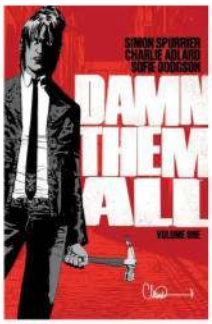
*The Curie Society* is published by MIT and cutting-edge science is an important element of the story. Anne Toole, alongside co-creators Heather Einhorn and Adam Staffaroni, has created an interesting and exciting tale with genuine surprises; it's enhanced by the artwork of Sonia Lao, the colour work of Heather Breckel and the lettering of DC Hopkins. I'd highly recommend picking up a copy, particularly if there are younger people in your family who have an interest in a potential STEM career. This is a highly entertaining way to engage new audiences and help them consider paths they might have thought closed to them.

## Damn Them All, Vols. 1 & 2

*Simon Spurrier, Charlie Adlard*

Boom! Studio

Pb, 176/160pp £14.99, ISBN: 9781608861545, 9781684159116




Ellie Hawthorne has just buried her uncle Alfie, is ordained in five religions and carries a hammer that might or might not put a curse on you, but is still a very big hammer. Then Alfie's wake is disrupted by a bunch of low-level gangsters armed with shotguns and a very apologetic demon. Living at the intersection between the occult community and the criminal underworld, Ellie soon discovers that the 72 demons of the Ars Goetica have left hell, and are really, really easy to command – if you possess the right artefact.

Simon Spurrier excels at writing gutter magicians and creative swearing, as well as transforming simple ideas into entertaining storylines. Charlie Adlard is a master of gore, capturing the dirt and grime of the world Ellie lives in, while Sofie Dodgson's colour work brings a luminescence to the demons among the shadows of the criminal underworld. Also, Jim Campbell's lettering has to do a lot of work here, capturing the voices of everyone from demons to the undead brought back in dark rituals. This is a gorgeous, brutal, and intelligent comic, perfect for anyone who likes their magic grimy and their violence graphic.

## Mister Howl

*TW Burgess*

Available soon from https://manoghosts.com/

Digital, £6

It's 1997. Jay has been in a serious accident and is now in a wheelchair, spending nearly all of his time in a rundown apartment he shares with his mum; his only distractions are the video camera she has bought for him and the goings-on in the apartment block opposite. Over time, what Jay sees unfolding in the rooms opposite his window gets stranger and more sinister, especially with the appearance of a monstrous, shadowy figure called Mister Howl. Finally, Jay has no choice but to take action.

Comics can be defined as a medium in which ideas are expressed through text combined with images combined or other visual information; it could be argued that *Mister Howl* is more of an illustrated story, but what makes it a comic is that the illustrations really are integral to the storytelling; and, anyway, as forteans we know that the boundaries between categories are always fluid. *Mister Howl* is essentially a highly effective found-footage horror story that uses images and storytelling to convey a rising sense of fear, terror and confinement. If you're a fan of the more experimental work of people like Dave Mckean, I think you'll enjoy this.

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# Slow death

This month: a change of pace and perspective breathes new and bloody life into the slasher movie, plus more religious horror and a micro-budget trip into the multiverse

## In a Violent Nature

**Dir Chris Nash, Canada 2024**
**In cinemas and on digital platforms**

Streaming services releasing original content are often met with scepticism, and while the horror platform Shudder certainly has some stinkers on its résumé, it has nonetheless managed to impress with some excellent offerings in recent years, *Late Night with Devil* being the latest to receive much acclaim from critics and audiences alike. Now, we have another Shudder original with the Canadian production *In A Violent Nature*.

Largely foregoing the usual exposition dumping, the film pushes the concept of "show, don't tell" to its fullest, as we follow a silent, hulking killer as he slowly but surely makes his way through a lush woodland, dispatching anyone trespassing on his territory in increasingly gory ways.

The plot is pretty well-worn: a seemingly immortal, lumbering behemoth à la Jason Voorhees, despatches a generic, expendable group of clueless teens, as well as a few knowing locals, with varying degrees of gruesomeness.

However, in spite of using the flimsiest and tritest of slasher movie scenarios, the change of perspective that makes viewers share the killer's point of view

*One of the most delightfully grotesque kills in recent memory*

gives the film a welcome curiosity value, while the genuinely creative filmmaking choices make it a rather delightful addition to the world of horror movies.

What particularly stands out is the sound design. Devoid of a score, the film instead relies on an intricate aural landscape to pull the viewer in, with the sounds of the great outdoors creating an unnerving juxtaposition of the peaceful indifference of the natural world with the purposeful brutality of a supernatural killer.

It does take some time before we get to the killing, but the film showcases impressively detailed practical effects, and offers one of the most delightfully grotesque kills in recent memory: for me, an instant horror hall of fame entry.

Here, again, the sound design comes into play, as the kills run unpleasantly long and a perversely comical undercurrent to the blood-spattered spectacle, pushes the gory killings to a point that is darkly humorous in a way rarely seen outside the likes of *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon*.

Impressively committed to its concept, the only point where the film lets itself down is towards the very end, as the final moments after the inevitable showdown feel forced, albeit the film still manages to end on a note of uncomfortable tension.

Some will undoubtedly find the whole thing painfully slow, and it is definitely an artsy affair, and an acquired taste. Others, meanwhile, will find the general concept pretentious. However, for horror fans who have the patience to engage with the film on its own terms, *In A Violent Nature* shows us how a change in perspective can make a film employing even the tiredest of tropes associated with the slasher genre an interesting watch, even a subversive treat. All in all, this is another worthwhile addition to Shudder's ever-expanding list of original films.

Leyla Mikkelsen

★★★★☆

## Thine Ears Will Bleed

**Dir Ben Bigelow, US 2024**
**On digital platforms**

The latest in a slew of religious-themed horror films, *Thine Ears Will Bleed* eschews your standard nuns, exorcists and demons in favour of a subtler approach. In the beginning anyway.

In 1860s America, preacher Ezekiel Thatcher is leading his family westward. His wife, Sarah, is almost as devout as Ezekiel; his son Luke is blind and admires his father greatly; and his daughter Abigail is less bothered about religion than she is about somehow making her way to New York to enjoy its sophistication.

Finding a fork in the road, unmarked on their map, Ezekiel decides (in a break from standard horror film behaviour) to take the path more travelled. This eventually peters out into a small glade where the family decide to camp for the night. From their wagon they hear strange, frightening noises but Ezekiel writes them off as "the sounds of nature". The following morning, the family are alarmed to find that their horses have disappeared, apparently having been freed from the tree to which they were tethered. Ezekiel goes in search and after a while finds himself on a cliff top with a view over a massive valley. He hears an overwhelming sound which he takes to be the voice of God. This is where his and his family's problems begin.

Like a lot of these 'what the hell's going' on films, *Thine Ears Will Bleed* is effective as long as it keeps building the mystery. When the explanations, such as they are, start to arrive, one's interest starts to flag: it's like Agatha Christie revealing whodunnit two-thirds of the way through a book. Unfortunately, the big reveal is much less interesting than when the audience is completely in the dark. The problem is that the last third of the film feels too familiar, being a lot like a mash-up of *The Shout*, *Ravenous* and *The Witch*; all good films, incidentally, but if your mystery turns out to be not really a mystery then a feeling of disappointment is inevitable. The last two or three minutes particularly are so hackneyed that I groaned inwardly.

This is a shame, because director Ben Bigelow (whose feature debut I believe this to be) does a lot right. The dialogue is appropriate for the period, thus avoiding a pitfall that besets many a low-budget production; the characters are well-drawn and, until things go south, behave credibly; and the locations in Montana are stunning. I'd like to see what he can do with something less derivative.

Daniel King

★★★☆☆

# TELEVISION

**FT's very own couch potato, STU NEVILLE, casts an eye over the small screen's current fortean offerings**

Hot on the heels of last year's successful *Paranormal: The Girl, The Ghost and the Gravestone*, Radio 1 DJ Sian Eleri heads back to her homeland to investigate another bit of wild Welsh weirdness, this time the Broad Haven UFO sighting of 1977, which has apparently barely been mentioned in the intervening 47 years (apart from the Netflix documentary *Encounters*, which covered it in detail at about the same time Eleri was wandering among the tombstones in her previous piece; but we'll come back to that). Once again, after a brief recap – obligatory clip of *John Craven's Newsround* reporting the incident, which was the first mention anybody heard of it unless they were there – Eleri leaves the hurly-burly of London for the unlit rural roads of Wales. This time it's Carmarthenshire, and again the Welsh remoteness and coastlines is stessed, almost to the point of channelling Dylan Thomas: *"…To begin at the beginning: It is day, playtime by the school, the kids pulling jumpers tagging at tag beneath the hills above, the shouts and screams and teacher's whistle-blast but little porky David Davis sits in empty classroom silence, head in his book. Look. The disc falls from the sky as the Sun sets but fast, the chainlink the net to stop the school of children rushing to see. The evening comes, tune in to teatime as Craven The Children's News, all kipper tie and hair bible-black tells the world, the world cocks an ear then goes back to slumber, but Randall Jones Pugh The UFO, sheepskin coat and porkpie hat keeps the flame alive, 'til sleep returns for decades from the dark hills to the jollyrogered sea…"*

*He's now a middle-aged chap in T-shirt, shades and a long grey ponytail*

Sian meets Davis, no longer the awkward, tag-shy bookworm but now a middle-aged chap in T-shirt, shades and long grey ponytail with the easy confidence of a retired rock drummer who now races Lamborghinis. Dave's clearly done good and isn't afraid to chat about what he saw. The following episodes – five in total – proceed to tread precisely the same ground as the previously mentioned *Encounters*, albeit in a Welsh accent and at two and a half times the length – and with a slightly irksome apparent policy of not mentioning any other coverage except *John Craven's Newsround*, as if it had been completely forgotten for 50 years. There is also the constant implication that all of this (well-known) info was uncovered by the solitary, dogged persistence of investigative reporter Sian Eleri.

Meanwhile, over on Channel 4, Suranne Jones has been investigating witch trials in the aptly named *Suranne Jones: Investigating Witch Trials*. Like Eleri, Jones starts in her own manor, in this case Pendle, to talk about the plight of women accused of witchcraft, a cause clearly close to her heart as she throws herself into the story, and empathises with the women whose only crime was to be independent and wise: it's less a paranormal documentary than a socio-historic one – well-made and worthy, but if it's Sabbats you're after you'll be left disappointed.

## Hostile Dimensions

**Dir Graham Hughes, UK 2023**
**On digital platforms**

*Hostile Dimensions* is a found-footage movie, but please don't let that put you off. This breathes new life into the subgenre and doesn't put a foot wrong.

The found footage in this particular example is that of a couple of graffiti artists exploring a derelict building, which is evidently something of a magnet for taggers. Inside, Emily (Josie Rogers) and Brian (Stephen Beavis), her videographer, are startled to find inside a free-standing door – nothing in front of it and nothing behind it. The feisty Emily opens it, steps through and disappears.

Sometime later, would-be film producers Sam (Annabel Logan) and Ash (Joma West) have got hold of Brian's footage and after the failure of their first movie, a documentary about a teddy bear shop, decide that investigating Emily's disappearance would be a great premise for another film. They somehow get the door back to their living room and, eventually, go through it.

What follows is a triumph of the imagination. This is essentially a multiverse film, and usually I'm quite averse to them. As I see it, they are a cheap way to get more stories out of the same characters: the possibilities are limitless and yet in practice are anything but. Umpteen Spidermen instead of one Spiderman isn't exactly mind-expanding. *Hostile Dimensions* is completely different. The doors are, of course, portals to other worlds – pardon me, 'multiverses' – and slowly the characters learn how they work and how to bring to life images and ideas from their imagination.

There is an extraordinary sequence towards the end in which Sam pursues the baddie, called Non Brian, for reasons too complicated to go into here, through portal after portal, emerging into a new world every time, even if only for a few seconds, as another new portal opens up. For example, there's a world seemingly far into the future where a terrible war is raging, and then there's an idyllic river scene interrupted by a human-sized fox wearing a huntsman's outfit taking pot shots at people.

Perhaps even better than the wildly imaginative visuals is the dialogue. The film is set in Scotland and the dry wit shines through. I wouldn't go so far as to say it's actually comedic, but it is definitely witty, with the characters taking the piss out of each other and generally being sarcastic about everything. The cast, especially Annabel Logan and Joma West, bring all of this to life wonderfully well.

*Hostile Dimensions* appears to be a micro-budget production, shot, as I understand it, in director Hughes's flat. So there are rough edges and the humour does get perilously close to silliness at times, but rarely do you find a production at this level that hits all of its targets so completely.

Daniel King

★★★★☆

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# LETTERS

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## Pyramid Power

I read with interest David Hambling's article on the Great Pyramid [**FT445:16**] and it got me thinking back to the Seventies, when indeed the pyramids were very much in vogue. One strange 'phenomenon' that I recall was the widely advertised 'eternally sharp razor'(or something similar as a descriptor). This was a polystyrene pyramid, typically advertised in the *Exchange and Mart* (wasn't that brilliant? The marketplace of the day, where you could buy anything from a smallholding in Wales, military surplus, cars, boats... eBay in paper) or the daily newspapers... adverts were everywhere, claiming to harness the power of the pyramid, making ridiculous claims to "aid the re-growth of the crystalline form of steel" and keep a razor sharp for ever more – just store it in the pyramid overnight...

I'd love to know whether there are any old gits like me who remember these styrofoam pyramids and whether anyone would admit to having purchased one and, heaven forbid, if it actually worked!!

While we're on the subject of that era, does anyone out there still have a copy of *The Triple Reciprocator* by Ken Geach? Almost impossible to find now – I had a copy of it in 1975 and tried to build one – it purported to enable direct communication with extraterrestrial life. Had all the instructions and diagrams in a mere 12 pages or so. I would love to revisit this.

**Mark Spurlock**
*Frome, Somerset*

## Kenyan frogs

Paul Sieveking's account of tadpole and frog falls in *Tales From The New Millennium* [**FT445:42-43**] reminded me of an experience I had as a child when living in Kenya. The country has two main seasons; in the dry season you can almost guarantee no rain, while the wet season provides tremendous downpours. For that reason, garden flowerbeds all have a small moat around them to cope with the potential volume of water. One day after a rain storm my sister and I were in our garden and noticed that the moat around the nearest flowerbed contained a large number of tiny frogs. We proceeded to collect 100 of them in a bucket, along with a supply of water, before letting them go again. I don't recall thinking it was unusual at the time, and maybe it wasn't, but now I wonder if it was actually a frog fall, and they had made their way to the nearest body of water.

**Dave Miles**
*By email*

## SIMULACRA CORNER

Tony Sandy sent us this wooden entity, commenting enigmatically: "It's Elephant tree, my dear Watson."

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to **Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH** or to **sieveking@forteantimes.com**

## Puzzles and Barbers

With regard to Alan Murdie's piece on the BBC programme "Stigma" [**FT446:19**], I do recall watching this when it was first broadcast. It didn't make a great impression, but I do remember getting excited as I recognised the setting as Avebury (I wouldn't get to visit it until around 20 years later) and that the idea seemed to me to be connected with the "barber-surgeon", the body found under the stone now known as "The Barber-Surgeon stone". I read a lot of books and articles about stone circles in general around that time, so have no idea where this might have come from. The programme itself is available on the BBC's DVD collection *Ghost Stories At Christmas.*

• Re Ted Harrison's "The Devil's Marmite Tree" [**FT446:47**], I have a vague memory of my father telling me (more than 60 years ago) that monkey puzzle trees were so-called because the sharp spines on the leaves all faced slightly outwards. This meant that a monkey (or presumably, child) climbing the tree would find it reasonably easy but coming back down would be extremely painful.

**Norman Darwen**
*Bolton, Lancashire*

## Possums vs Opossums

I may well be guilty of obsessive pedantry, but as a resident of Perth, Western Australia, I feel I must point out that the creature sent flying by one of the orangutans in our city zoo was a *possum*, not an *opossum* [**FT441:7**]. While both possums and opossums are marsupials, opossums are members of the order Didelphimorphia and are found exclusively in the Americas, whereas Australian possums are found in the sub-order Phalangeriformes and are native to Australia, New Guinea and parts of Indonesia (and are running riot in New Zealand after some idiot introduced them there). Despite the similar name (from a Powhatan word meaning 'white animal'), the two groups are only distantly related.

While in casual speech 'possum' may be used to refer to both the American and Australian animals, 'opossum' refers exclusively to the American ones.

The particular species of possum violently evicted by the orangutan has been reported as *Trichosurus vulpecula*, the common brushtail possum. It is apparently common knowledge in New Zealand that while possums are regarded as a pest species there, they are endangered in Australia, with some commentators suggesting that New Zealand should export locally captured animals back to their motherland – preferably in exchange for cash. Unfortunately, while there are a number of Australian possum species that are critically endangered, the species of possum infesting New Zealand is the common brushtail possum, which is common as muck. So any plan to sell them back to Australia is doomed from the start.

**James Nicholls**
*Perth, Western Australia*

## Piquant flood

Your report on the Portuguese wine flood [**FT445:10**] brought back happy memories of its Birmingham counterpart, less purple but no less piquant. When I lived there (1974-1979), HP Sauce was made in a factory on the east bank of the Aston Expressway (A38M), with vinegar, a key ingredient, piped in over the Expressway from a store on the west bank. The pipe was known locally as the Vinegar Bridge. One day this sprang a leak and gallons of vinegar flooded the Expressway. For some reason, it didn't drain away, and speeding motorists were surprised to create spectacular vinegar cascades.

**Rob Scales**
*London*

# LETTERS

## Alex Cleghorn disappears

Following my letter about the investigation into the alleged 'Invisible Barrier' report [**FT444:60-61**] featured in John Michell and Robert Rickard's book *Phenomena: A Book of Wonders* (Thames & Hudson, 1977), I have researched another strange happening included in the book.

In the chapter on Strange Disappearances (page 99), the authors write: "A spontaneous echo of (the) old belief that an abducted person reappears and may return on the anniversary of their disappearance comes from a report in the *Scottish Daily Express*, 27 December 1971."

A kindly assistant at the central library in Glasgow found the article for me and scanned it and emailed it to me.

It reads:

*Riddle of a Missing Brother*

*Two brothers will walk along Glasgow's Govan Road early on New Year's morning... almost six years to the minute that their younger brother disappeared. For since New Year's morning, 1966, dark-haired Alex Cleghorn, of Penilee Terrace, Penilee, has not been seen by his family.*

*Alex was 19 when he vanished, as he walked behind his two older brothers while they were out first-footing.*

*In Govan police station, Alex is still listed as a missing person. And at their home Alex's family still have hope that someday he will turn up.*

*This year, William (28) and David (31) will retrace their steps along Govan Road at the same spot where Alex disappeared in the vain hope that somehow, he may return.*

*Said Mr David Cleghorn, the missing man's father, last night: "It will probably be useless. But as long as we still have hope we will try anything to find Alex. There are thoughts that he might have staggered onto a ship on the Clyde under the influence of drink. But if this had been the case Alex would somehow have got in touch with us."*

The report is also briefly mentioned in Janet and Colin Bord's *Modern Mysteries of Britain*, (p.139), which includes the sentence: "They were walking along Govan Road when suddenly Alex was no longer there."

**ABOVE**: Glasgow's Govan Road in the 1970s.

A Google search shows that exactly the same information is revealed on a number of fortean/mystery/paranormal websites.

I contacted Anne Fotheringham, senior investigative journalist for the *Glasgow Times*, who kindly ran a media appeal on my behalf. (www.glasgowtimes.co.uk/news/23223700.chilling-mystery-glasgow-teenager-vanished-1966/)

The article mentioned that a surviving cousin of the Cleghorn family (no name given) was interviewed on BBC Scotland's programme *Reporting Scotland*, and related how the disappearance had divided the family, with some believing he had fallen into the Clyde, with others believing something more supernatural was afoot.

I submitted an FoI request to Strathclyde Police requesting any additional information which was released to the public about the mystery, and they replied that there are no details currently available (or 'currently live' as they termed it); and that as the investigation is still ongoing (even after all this time), the police do not want to comment further on it.

There are so many unanswered questions. As the family lived in the Penilee district, which is about two miles from Govan Road, where were they first-footing from? Had they celebrated Hogmanay at home and set off towards Govan Road – and why? Had they been to pubs or a friend's house on Govan Road? Which direction were they travelling in? Towards or away from their home in Penilee? According to my FoI request, none of this information is currently available to the public. Why not?

It does seem strange to me that the police cannot find any further details previously released to the public, especially within the first week following the disappearance, and in my media appeal I was contacted by William Cleghorn (Alex's nephew), who told me there was a lot of press coverage at the time. So why is that additional information no longer available?

One reader of the newspaper appeal, Louise, wrote: "I didn't think they had relatives in Govan, but perhaps they were meeting pals in one of the pubs in that area?" A reader of the *Glasgow Times* article named 'Jaz Macb' made an online comment which read "See Missing 411". So I Googled "Missing 411" which was revealed to be a series of self-published books by former police officer (and Bigfoot investigator and conspiracy theorist) David Paulides, about people who have gone missing in alleged mysterious circumstances – which may or may not include Alex Cleghorn.

However, I decided against buying any of his books to help with my research, due to various comments made by sceptics (including *FT* contributor Sharon Hill), that the mysterious disappearances do not appear to be in any way mysterious and that any alleged connection between them does not stand up to close scrutiny!

Someone else told me that shortly after the teenager's disappearance, Alex's father had been called away by the police, and then had returned home ashen faced, suggesting that he had been told that Alex had died, but deciding not to tell the rest of the family.

However, I doubt that the police would have withheld details from the rest of the family and the public, purely on the request of Alex's father, and judging from the latter's quote from the 1971 (above), about hoping that his son would one day return, this is another reason I doubt this was the case.

Two members of the family told me how an unmarked grave had been found, and a body exhumed, and several members of the family had been asked for a DNA sample to compare to that of the body. (Members of the same family have similar DNA – known as 'familial DNA' – so that deceased people can be matched to their surviving family members for identification purposes).

Steven Deighan suggested I try several Govan community groups on Facebook and so I contacted the group 'I Came Fae Govan' with requests for information. I received a reply from Brian Ballynock Law, who wrote: "I was at school with his younger brother Joseph. They lived in Penilee. What was said was, as the three of them passed one close mouth, they turned round and he was gone."

I asked him what 'close mouth' meant, and he replied: "It is the opening to a tenement building, what was referred to in Glasgow as a 'close mouth' (which) led to the stairs."

Although the case is still classed as a missing person case, a search on Google revealed an inclusion on the www.unsolved-murders.co.uk website. This includes an unhelpful three-word audio commentary: "Alex Cleghorn vanished", (which I knew already), but it includes a

link to https://sjhstrangetales.wordpress.com. On the British Unsolved Murders and Disappearances page, the Alex Cleghorn mystery is number 13 on the list, and the author writes: "A very odd case this one. It often pops up on lists of inexplicable disappearances, but the lack of information is absolutely baffling."

I can't help but agree.

However, the website includes one piece of information that I had not found elsewhere: that Alex had disappeared on the section of Govan Road between Rathlin Street and McKechnie Street. I emailed the website owner to ask where he/she had got this information from, but received no reply. I asked members of local history Facebook group whether there was ever a tenement building on Govan Road between Rathlin Street and McKechnie Street but, again, received no reply.

If there are any Glaswegian fortean historians reading this, perhaps you could enlighten us all on this issue.

Having seen a map of Govan Road, I would judge that the river Clyde is at least 500 yards away from the main road, so if Alex had stumbled down one of the side streets off Govan Road (such as Rathlin Street or McKechnie Street) I would have thought one of his brothers would have rushed back to the side street and seen his brother wandering away, and then ran after him. It does seem more likely that he entered a building, in which case he could have disappeared out of sight fairly quickly.

Jackie Huybens sent me an email which read:

*Alex Cleghorn is my uncle: my mom's older brother. My mom moved to Canada when she was a teen. We would love to have the mystery of her brother disappearing solved. I think she thinks of this often. We thank you for your help with this.*

Jackie also mentioned the "story or rumour" about an unidentified body being found in the river shortly after Alex's disappearance and then buried in an unmarked grave. She also mentioned that a detective had asked for a DNA sample from family members, but as Strathclyde Police told me, no further information is being released to the public.

A curious piece of folklore has arisen from the mystery.

Stacey Cleghorn contacted me and wrote: *Alex was my Dad's Dad's son. We've always wondered what happened to him. My Dad always used to tell me this story about Alex just vanishing when I was wee. For the longest time I thought it was a made-up story, because he would always make up a story to try and scare us, and I thought it was one of them. And I remember thinking 'How scary'. As a result, my Dad never let me and my sister split a lamp-post. This means that if there was a lamp-post in the street and one of us was going to walk on one side of it, and another of us on the other, then we weren't allowed to do that, I think in the fear that we would go missing.*

*My auntie Jean (Dad's sister) said that they searched the (river) and found nothing.*

On the website Reddit, on the Unsolved Mysteries page, someone suggests that Alex was killed (intentionally or accidentally) by his brothers, but the teenager's nephew Alan Cleghorn wrote: "My Dad never killed his brother. He was heartbroken till his grave."

Louise Thomson wrote: *I remember the Cleghorn family quite well as I was brought up in Penilee (and lived at 7 Craigmuir Place) and was at school with Phyllis Cleghorn, Alex's sister. I don't know much but do remember that sad time and have never forgotten the family and their tragic story. I often wonder about Phyllis as she was a lovely, gentle person, who will be ages with me now, I think. Unfortunately, I don't know a lot about Alex disappearing that night. He may have walked to Govan. The No. 17 (bus), I think, went to Govan Cross from Penilee for years. I didn't think they had relatives in Govan but perhaps they were meeting pals in one of the many pubs in that area.*

The mystery still stands.

**Andy Owens**
*Halifax, West Yorkshire*

## The Ice-Cream Man Cometh

Reading recent FT correspondence about ice-cream which miraculously doesn't melt [**FT442:64, 446:59-60**], I was reminded of Blessed Solanus Casey (1870-1957), an eccentric Detroit-based Capuchin friar whom I wrote about briefly in an article for a Catholic website about the history of alleged religious food-based miracles, such as the miraculous multiplication of loaves, etc. [https://crisismagazine.com/opinion/feasts-of-the-saints-the-magical-multiplication-of-food-at-christmas]

Casey, I recorded: "is said to have once accepted a pair of ice-creams and then absent-mindedly placed them inside his desk on a hot summer day, where they should really have melted. When he pulled them out to share with a visitor later, however, not only were they still perfectly well-frozen, they were also now three in number, as if the treats had surreptitiously mated and had a little baby cone behind closed doors!"

So there we have an alternative potential explanation for the miraculous non-melting summer treats discussed: that their purchasers simply made some well-judged prayers to Friar Casey. Looking the matter up online, I cannot find that the Vatican has as yet officially appointed any specific 'Patron Saint of Ice-Cream', but when they finally do, it should surely be him. Any readers who do pray to Solanus's immortal soul to prevent their beachfront cornet-contents melting and succeed in receiving such vital divine intervention should immediately send in their accounts to the Vatican as evidence, so that maybe one day the thaumaturge in question may become known as 'St Casey of the Cone'.

**SD Tucker**
*Widnes, Cheshire*

## Bizarre day-dreams

I was fascinated by Rob Gandy's report of weird sightings on the Halsall roads [**FT446:42**]. Back in the 1960s and 1970s, my father, then a keen gardener, would buy sacks of 'spent' compost from the big mushroom sheds in that area. Some weeks after spreading, there'd be a fine crop of neat white buttons, fit for salads and stew. Any 'sports', with anomalous shape or colour, were warily glove-picked and binned.

I seem to recall that much 'spent' compost was trucked a mile or so to nearby fields, spread and ploughed in. Deep ploughed, lest unfortunate timing and weather conditions favour a very unwelcome strain of fungus, one that produced ergotamines. In really 'still' conditions, perhaps with a temperature inversion, such a field might micro-dose passers-by. Susceptibility varied: for most people, this would have scant effect, no more so than a supper cheese-board. The unlucky few got attention lapses and bizarre day-dreams, akin to 'Charles Bonnet Syndrome'.

**Nik Kelly**
*Liverpool*

"Just for once, can't they call me Vlad the stylish? Or Vlad The Generous Host? I mean, why does it always have to be about the impaling?"

CLIVE GODDARD

# It Happened to Me...

Readers write in with their own accounts of strange phenomena

## Partner duplicated

I am always interested to read about hypnopompic hallucinations or sleep demons, because of what I experienced about 30 years ago.

I was in bed in the middle of the night, and was woken by the bedroom door opening and my partner coming in. He had clearly been up to go to the toilet, although I thought at the time that it was strange that I'd not woken up when he'd got out of bed.

We had quite flimsy curtains and there was a streetlight outside, so I could see quite well. I remember very clearly watching him push the door shut quietly behind him, and the look on his face as he walked over to the bed – he looked quite relaxed and content. As he approached the bed, I turned over so I would be facing him when he got back in to bed.

As I turned my arm fell on something in the bed under the covers. It felt solid and large and I was completely stunned – it was so unexpected that it made me feel really shocked and disorientated as I couldn't imagine what it could be. Time seemed to go really slowly and it was with some effort that I dragged my eyes from my approaching partner to the bed as I felt so much dread.

What I saw was my partner, fast asleep in bed beside me. My hand had fallen on his leg. Looking up, I saw the room was empty.

The sight of him coming in the door and walking across the room was as vividly experienced as anything I'd seen in "real life". Possibly the interesting thing here is the mundane nature of the form it took. It must be truly awful if it takes a more frightening form.

**Louise van der Hoeven**
*Langley Park, Co Durham*

## Spanner provided

Some months ago, I called in to a local charity shop for a browse. My eye caught a musical instrument case on the counter. The shape of the case transported me instantly back to the early 1950s when I bought (in Shrewsbury), my first instrument – a banjo ukulele. I believe in serendipity; was this my opportunity to reacquaint myself with that unmistakable George Formby plinkity-plink? I was close with my guess. It turned out to be a Reliance banjo-mandolin from the 1920s.

Both the instrument and the case were in a sad state, but I could see that this beautiful instrument was repairable. For 40 NZ dollars (a little over £19) it was mine.

The first task was to dismantle the instrument. All went well until I came across two small bolts, barely visible and awkwardly placed in a narrow, curved space between the vellum head and the circular wood rim. I needed a special spanner – one that was both thin enough and narrow enough to go through the curved gap, was bent in the correct place and at the correct angle and, of course, one that fitted the bolt. My workshop is very well equipped but I did not have such a tool. Now, here's the fortean twist.

**I went into my office and there on the desk was a small spanner**

The following morning, I went into my office and there on the desk was a small spanner. Puzzled but smiling, I tested it on the banjo-mandolin. Perfect! It was thin enough and narrow enough to go through the curved gap; it was bent in the correct place and at exactly at the correct angle; and it was the right size to fit the bolt head. Only my wife Lesley and I were in the house overnight and neither of us had seen it before. So? I have no idea where it came from, but I'm open to such events and feel very grateful. Thank you very much, whatever, whoever and wherever you are.

**John Wise**
*Napier, New Zealand*

**ABOVE:** John Wise's restored banjo-madolin and the mysterious apporting spanner.

## A Turkish tiger tale

I have been interested in fortean, and especially cryptozoological, subjects for a long time, and in the summer of 1979 I and a group of friends travelled to eastern Turkey to investigate reports of surviving Caspian tigers, a subspecies that was already supposed to be extinct. We didn't find any tigers, though we did obtain some information on the status of other carnivores, and reported this to various researchers and conservation bodies. Several years later I read Karl Shuker's *Mystery Cats of the World*, and discovered that although Karl had covered his subject in fascinating detail he did not have anything on the Caspian tiger conundrum. So at the beginning of 1990 I wrote to him. He was generous enough to reply that he found my information interesting, and asked permission to use it in any future edition of his book. This I was happy to grant.

I had planned further cryptozoological expeditions, but owing to some difficult personal circumstances this did not happen, and I more or less forgot about the matter, though I did correspond with Karl about these plans on a couple of occasions during the 1990s. I had previously been a sporadic reader of *Fortean Times*, but I did not have a subscription at that time, and as far as I can recall I had not seen a copy for at least five or six years, until one day I spotted the latest issue in WH Smith and bought it on impulse. This was issue 146 (May 2001), and I was surprised to find that it included an article, "Tracking a Turkish Tiger" by Karl Shuker, which featured my report of the 1979 trip.

As this was the first time, as far as I know, that this report had been published (and I can assure you I had no advance warning), it was interesting that I had just happened to pick the magazine up – one issue out of perhaps a hundred that I hadn't seen. I thought about writing to you then, but decided that the readers of *Fortean Times* of all people would find this kind of coincidence quite unremarkable. I kept the article, had a laugh about it with friends who probably hadn't believed a

word I said about the tiger hunt until then, and filed it away, but again life intervened and I didn't think much more about it. Another version of my report appeared in Karl's *Cats of Magic, Mythology and Mystery* in 2012, but at some point after that I lost track of where I had put the correspondence. Then last Saturday, 8 July 2023, issue 434 of FT appeared on the doormat (I do now have a subscription). That same afternoon my wife, reorganising the bedroom, found some box files under a chest of drawers and asked me what was in them. I had no idea.

If this was fiction the missing correspondence would of course have been in the box files, but I am bound to tell it as it happened even at the expense of dramatic effect. One of the files was empty but in pristine condition, which prompted my wife to suggest that I should transfer to it the contents of another battered and over-full plastic file which had been languishing in a corner of a bookcase and had not been sorted for years. It was in there that I found the 2001 article, plus Karl's letters from 1990.

The whole business is no more than the sort of coincidence that is routine fare for forteans, but if the magazine itself is pulling this kind of stunt, I think you ought to know.

**Chris Peers**
*Sutton Coldfield, West Midlands*

## Mysterious pupil

I was always fascinated by the story of Robert Johnson, and how he sold his soul to the Devil at the crossroads at midnight, in order to play the blues. In case you don't know the story of Johnson, who is in some ways the father of rock 'n' roll, he was a poor young black guy, who left his village, unable to play the guitar very well, and returned months later an accomplished blues musician, whose playing influenced generations of guitarists. It was said he sold his soul by going to the crossroads one evening at midnight, where he gave his guitar to a black man, who then tuned it and handed it back to him. That was the contract with his Satanic Majesty, or so they say. He died early, at the age of 27, some say poisoned by a jealous husband.

I was thinking of this story while on my way home from drinking in

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**The mist was swirling around him; it reminded me of a scene in *The Exorcist***

town with some mates one Friday afternoon, over a decade ago. It was early evening and the temperature had dropped by the time I got off the train, causing a mist to settle that was rapidly turning into fog; only the occasional person could be seen walking by, like grey shadows floating in the gloom.

The Johnson story drifted into my mind as I walked home. I'd toyed with the idea in the past, when I first moved to where I now live, just for fun, of going to the crossroads like Johnson, with my guitar at midnight, just to see what would happen. There was a place called the 'Fourways' where some roads met nearby. The name always brought to mind the Johnson story, but at the time it only had three actual roads, so I assumed that wouldn't do, but just up ahead from where I was walking home was an actual crossroads outside a pub, with a traffic island in the middle, and where I'd spent the occasional night asleep in my early twenties, getting off the all-night bus after missing my stop, a little the worse for wear, and falling asleep there.

I smiled to myself again as I thought of taking my acoustic there one night and playing it, but of course knew I'd never actually do it, but it was a fun thing to contemplate now and again.

Anyway, it was getting rather chilly as I turned into my street and I just wanted to get home and get warm. As I walked down the street I became aware of a figure just discernible in the fog – nothing more than a silhouette. I didn't take much notice at first but from the corner of my eye, saw they were walking perhaps 30 yards behind me.

Now where I live, I have a lot of black neighbours, but back then not so many, and not all the houses on the 'new build' estate had been sold, so it was rather quiet most of the time. In fact I used to turn my Strat up full volume when I played, as I had virtually no neighbours there when I first moved in.

I unlocked the front door, leaving it open while I turned off the alarm in the hallway, when suddenly I heard a low but distinctive whistle from behind me. I turned and there was a young black lad, maybe in his early twenties, standing grinning at me. He was wearing a long black overcoat and a wide brimmed black hat – as far as I could see he was wearing nothing but black. The mist was swirling around him, and it reminded me of that scene in *The Exorcist*, when the priest turns up at the house and stands beneath the street light.

He asked if he could speak to me about something, so I nodded yes, kind of intrigued, but not really wanting to, as I was feeling a little befuddled, and didn't really feel in the mood for conversation. He said that he walked past my house regularly, and had always wondered who played the guitars that he could see in the window above. It's more like patio doors, but they're on the second floor, like a balcony, so the guitars are easily spotted if you look up, though I've noticed that no one ever usually does.

I said that it was me that played. He seemed to think for a moment, and then said, "Would you teach me to play?" I just said yeah OK, without really thinking it through, and then asked where he lived, trying to make the effort to be friendly. He pointed vaguely into the mist and said, "Just down the road there".

I scribbled my phone number on a piece of paper and told him that Sunday was a good day, and if he wanted to, just to call around at any time. He thanked me and disappeared off into the mist. I never saw him again.

Being a bit befuddled I'd forgotten I was going to a christening that Sunday – otherwise I'd have been home as I usually was, but I had no way to contact him to tell him not to come.

The funny thing is that from my living room I can see everyone who passes down the street, and I recognise them, even if I don't know them to speak to – I can spot a stranger a mile away, but I'd never seen him on the street before. He never called me on the phone while I was out that Sunday, or at least there was no message when I got in. I speculated that he must've called around, but on getting no answer, after building up the courage to speak me in the first place, had gone home feeling disappointed, never to return.

I fully expected to see him pass by in the street one day, and so be able to explain to him what had happened, but I never did see him again.

Now and again I think of what happened and it seemed distinctly strange. With hindsight it definitely felt weird, even the clothes he was wearing seemed an odd choice for a lad of his age – a wide-brimmed black hat and black overcoat. The whole thing felt like something from an episode of the *Twilight Zone*, and even at the time as events unfolded, it felt somehow unreal, though at the time I put this down to the beer consumed earlier and the misty atmosphere.

Perhaps there is a more rational and less 'romantically spooky' explanation for what happened, or at least a reason why he never came back again – or was my soul up for sale that night, and it was this, as someone later said, just a close call? Had my imagination called out to something otherworldly?

To my knowledge, I'd never seen him before that evening or since, and I'm sure I would definitely have bumped into him at some point, as there's only two ways in and out of the estate.

**Mike Kerins**
*By email*

# LETTERS

## Moon in motion

Katrina Anne Ward, seeing the Moon appearing to shift in the sky [**FT445:62**], is experiencing Perceptual Set. Due to the featureless background and other factors such as the otoliths convincing the brain that one's body is still in motion during a long stare, all culminates in the illusion of the Moon moving. It's similar to the lurch of disorientation felt while waiting for a ski gondola, when the temporary illusion occurs that the gondola is stationary, and the rest of the station is moving up to meet it. Such illusions diminish with the jadedness of maturity – enjoy! As we're on the subject, may I recommend "The Earth seen from the Moon" by Pier Paolo Pasolini, his segment of the portmanteau film *La Streghe*?

• The Crucifixion of Bernard Denis [**FT445:9**] constituted a paradox, and I hope I'm not the first to notice. If he's denouncing imaginary crimes against his political opponents, then who blindfolded him and nailed him to a cross in a field? Did he do that himself? Because that's commitment!

**James Wright**
*Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex*

I'm sure I won't be the only reader writing to reassure Katrina Anne Ward that she is neither losing her mind nor her eyesight. What she so aptly describes: the Moon shifting erratically like a "sheet of acetate" is a natural phenomenon caused by the subconscious movement of the eyeballs when staring at a brightly illuminated object against a dark background with limited visual context.

I first learnt of this in an issue of FT where the optical illusion was used to explain why people might feel the planet Venus is chasing them or a spotlighted statue of the Virgin Mary is in motion. I have experienced this myself when attempting to photograph the Moon or stars high in the night sky. Both my photos and Ms Ward's video confirm the objects are in fact motionless (at least relative to us).

One isn't normally aware of these shenanigans as one's brain usually compensates, but it can't do so without sufficient background cues from the surroundings. I hope this possible explanation puts Ms Ward's mind at rest.

**Ryan Shirlow**
*Leeds, West Yorkshire*

While not proposing any definitive explanation for the phenomenon Katrina Anne Ward describes, it reminded me of an item I once found in an old copy of the *East Anglian Daily Times* (17 March 1930). Under the headline 'Queer Things That The Moon Did' it was stated:

*Strange lunar happenings are reported to have preceded the snowstorm which raged throughout South Yorkshire and Derbyshire on Saturday. According to Mr. Elijah Howarth, a Sheffield meteorologist, the moon oscillated from side to side independently of the change of its position in the sky due to the earth's rotation.*

*"Such oscillations," stated Mr Howarth "have probably never been witnessed before. They gave an impression that almost suggested a possibility of the moon coming to earth. After nine o'clock, when the moon had been above the horizon for a couple of hours, it seemed to be moving, not from side to side but from the upright position to the left. What was happening was an oscillation of the whole body of the moon itself."*

*An official of Greenwich Observatory stated on Saturday night that the phenomenon was not observed from the Observatory. "I have never seen nor heard of the moon acting in that way," he added. At the Meteorological Office it was stated that no reports of any phenomenon had been received.*

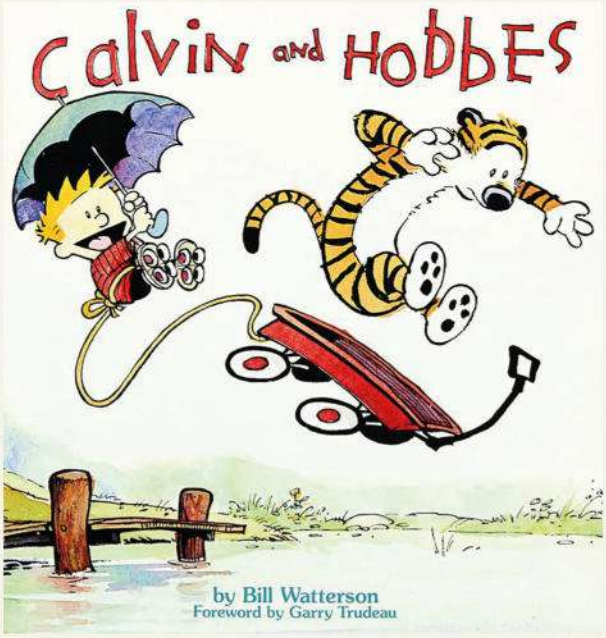
Probably a more detailed account of Mr Howarth's experience can be discovered elsewhere.

From readily available on-line information, Elijah Howarth (1853-1938) was a credible observer, a fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society, one of the founders of the Museums Association and a museum curator at Sheffield (from an obituary appearing in the 1939 *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society*, vol.99, p.311).

Patrick Harpur in his book *Daemonic Reality* (1994) in the chapter 'Seeing things' cites an incident on 4 October 1981 of a lady and her daughter-in-law at Hollington in Sussex seeing a bright yellow object in the sky that "wobbled, pulsated and repeatedly changed" shape for half an hour; the object concerned was recognised alternatively as the Moon.

Harpur issues a cogent reproach against casual and parsimonious dismissals of such potentially visionary experiences as mere misperceptions, citing, for example, William Blake.

**Alan Murdie**
*Edinburgh, Scotland*




## One and the same?

• Could the "enigmatic tracks" [**FT444:10**] noticed in Prince Albert, Canada, have been produced by a carefully handled drone? What I see in the photo are marks made by something that touched the ground only briefly.

• One Sideline reports the mysterious appearance of Sergey Ochigava at Los Angeles airport [**FT443:6**], while another reports the mysterious appearance of an unidentified Asian man with whom no one could communicate – in a Los Angeles hospital [**FT444:8**]. The two reports in December were a week apart. Could they be the same man? In the search for weirdness, would it be weirder for them to be one, or two, people? I think it would be weirder if they were the same person. I'm willing to discuss the criteria for weirdness. There really should be an objective standard. Maybe.

• Daniel Kitto expresses some worry that weirdness is decreasing [**FT444:59**]. Sometimes we have to make more weirdness. The American comic strip *Calvin & Hobbes*, by famously reclusive artist Bill Waterson, is about a boy and his plush tiger. An aspect of their quest is to experience weirdness.

**Michael Holt** *By emaiL*

## Fifty-six

I'm a bit behind with my FTs, and have just seen Tony Purcell's letter [**FT426:61**], recounting his experience of dining at table number 56 in a hotel and being given a bill for £56.56. He might be pleased to know that his letter consists of 56 words (up to and including the word 'delivered') followed by 56 characters (including numbers, symbols, and punctuation). I can reassure you that this kind of scrutiny is *not* the reason I've got a backlog of magazines.

**Rob Bray**
*Glastonbury, Somerset*

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# WHY *FORTEAN*?

**FORTEAN TIMES** is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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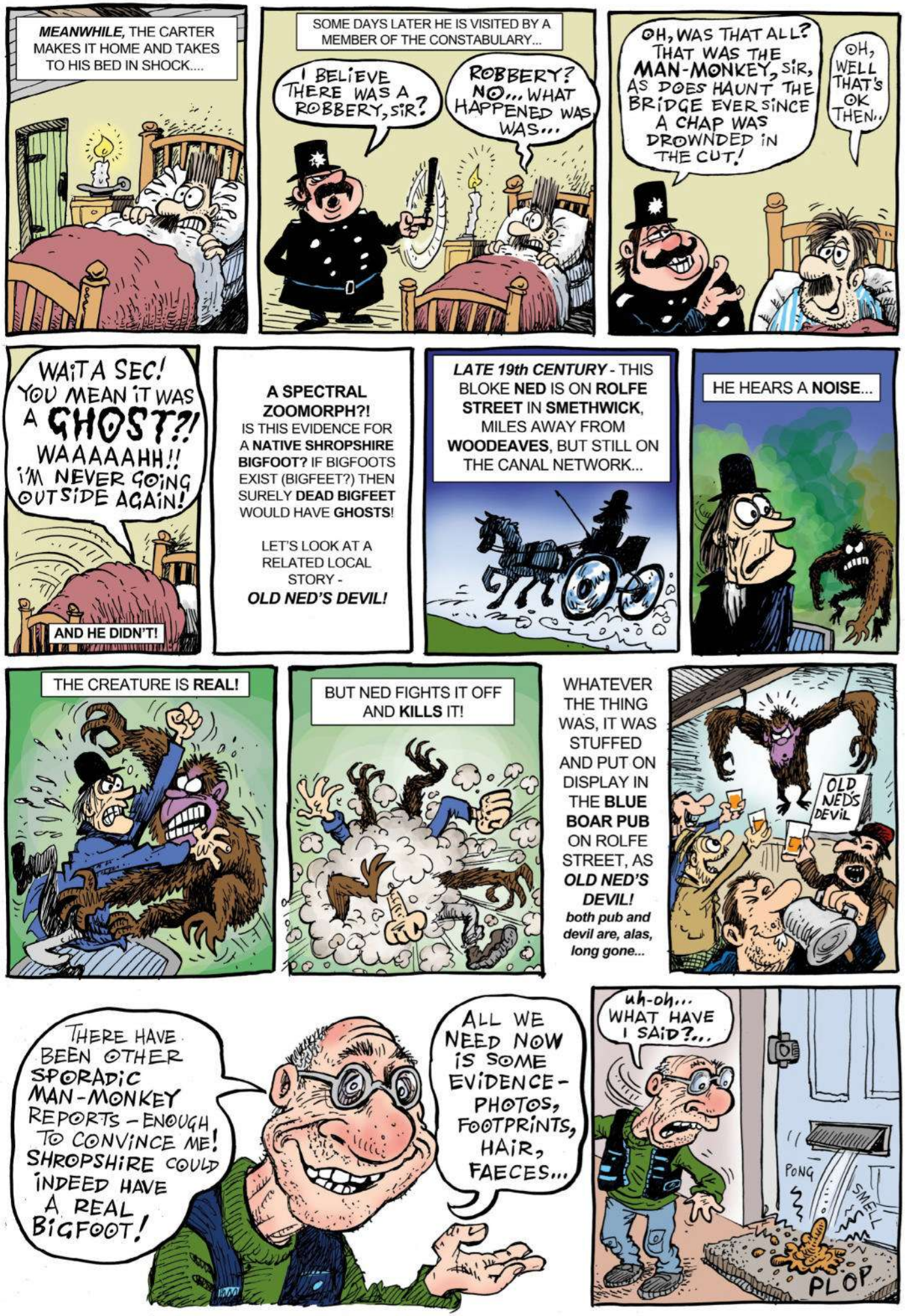
# PHENOMENOMIX

MAN-MONKEY

HUNT EMERSON

IF YOU WERE PAYING ATTENTION LAST MONTH, YOU MAY RECALL THE STORY OF THE BOATLOAD OF WISE FOOLS WHOSE INVESTIGATIONS INTO THE **SHROPSHIRE MAN-MONKEY** TOOK THEM MISTAKENLY TO VISIT **BRIDGE 39W** - THE WRONG BRIDGE! WELL, *THIS* IS THE RIGHT BRIDGE - **BRIDGE 39**, WHERE IT ALL REALLY HAPPENED...
THE ROAD OVER THE BRIDGE RUNS FROM **LOYNTON** TOWARDS **RANTON**, AND ON JANUARY 21st 1879 A CHAP IS HEADING FOR HOME ON HIS CART, WHEN....
SWISH!
HIS WHIP PASSES ***STRAIGHT THROUGH*** THE CREATURE!
SWIPE!
AAAGH!
EEK!
THE HORSE AND CART **RACE** OVER THE BRIDGE AND THE GHOSTLY MAN-MONKEY ***VANISHES!***
GASP! HELP! TERRIBLE TERROR!
...MAN-MONKEY!... ...GREAT HAIRY THING! ...AND IT WASN'T THERE!
IT'S COMING TO GET US!!!
SLAM!
I REMEMBER WHEN I HAD MY FIRST DRINK...
Y'KNOW, GEORGE, IF THE MAN-MONKEY IS OUT, I'M FEART TO GO HOME OVER THE BRIDGE
I RECKON I'D BEST STOP HERE IN THE PUB TONIGHT, DON'T YOU? PUT ANOTHER LARGE ONE IN THERE, WOULD YOU? TO HELP MY NERVES...


MEANWHILE, THE CARTER MAKES IT HOME AND TAKES TO HIS BED IN SHOCK....
SOME DAYS LATER HE IS VISITED BY A MEMBER OF THE CONSTABULARY...
I BELIEVE THERE WAS A ROBBERY, SIR?
ROBBERY? NO... WHAT HAPPENED WAS WAS...
OH, WAS THAT ALL? THAT WAS THE MAN-MONKEY, SIR, AS DOES HAUNT THE BRIDGE EVER SINCE A CHAP WAS DROWNDED IN THE CUT!
OH, WELL THAT'S OK THEN..
WAIT A SEC! YOU MEAN IT WAS A GHOST?! WAAAAAHH!! I'M NEVER GOING OUTSIDE AGAIN!
AND HE DIDN'T!
A SPECTRAL ZOOMORPH?! IS THIS EVIDENCE FOR A NATIVE SHROPSHIRE BIGFOOT? IF BIGFOOTS EXIST (BIGFEET?) THEN SURELY DEAD BIGFEET WOULD HAVE GHOSTS!
LET'S LOOK AT A RELATED LOCAL STORY - OLD NED'S DEVIL!
LATE 19th CENTURY - THIS BLOKE NED IS ON ROLFE STREET IN SMETHWICK, MILES AWAY FROM WOODEAVES, BUT STILL ON THE CANAL NETWORK...
HE HEARS A NOISE...
THE CREATURE IS REAL!
BUT NED FIGHTS IT OFF AND KILLS IT!
WHATEVER THE THING WAS, IT WAS STUFFED AND PUT ON DISPLAY IN THE BLUE BOAR PUB ON ROLFE STREET, AS OLD NED'S DEVIL! both pub and devil are, alas, long gone...
OLD NED'S DEVIL
THERE HAVE BEEN OTHER SPORADIC MAN-MONKEY REPORTS - ENOUGH TO CONVINCE ME! SHROPSHIRE COULD INDEED HAVE A REAL BIGFOOT!
ALL WE NEED NOW IS SOME EVIDENCE - PHOTOS, FOOTPRINTS, HAIR, FAECES...
uh-oh... WHAT HAVE I SAID?...
PONG
SMELL
PLOP

# COMING NEXT MONTH

## YORKSHIRE GOTHIC

*FEAR AND FOLK HORROR IN STARVE ACRE*

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*THE WEIRD TRADITIONS OF BRITISH FOOD*

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FORTEAN TIMES 449
on sale 5 Sept 2024

# STRANGE DEATHS

## UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

It seems to have been an unusually busy period for stories of large reptiles swallowing women. In Kalempang, Indonesia, a woman named only as Farida, 50, disappeared while walking to her local market, prompting a search of nearby forest. This turned up a 20ft (6m) long python lying in the undergrowth with a worryingly large bulge in its stomach. After the snake was killed and cut open, the bulge was found to be the missing Farida, who had been first bitten on the leg by the snake, then swallowed head first. A few weeks later, an even larger python, 30ft (9m) long, swallowed a 30-year-old woman named Sirati near the village of Siteba, South Sulawesi, also in Indonesia. She had taken a road through the forest to buy medicine for her youngest child, but did not return, so her brother raised the alarm. Sirati's husband went looking for her and first discovered her sandals on the track, then spotted the python with his wife's feet sticking out of its mouth. He killed the animal and cut Sirati out, but she was already dead. "Perhaps the bones had been crushed," said local Adjunct Police Commissioner Idul. Commenting on the women's deaths, python expert Mark O'Shea said the women's deaths would have been "very fast" as the snake's constriction would have rendered them unconscious within moments as blood was "pushed to the top and bottom of the body", leading to a swift heart attack and death. Meanwhile, in Florida, wildlife officials captured and killed a 14ft (4.3m) alligator that contained the body of Sabrina Peckham, 31, a homeless woman who had been camping close to a canal in Largo. Police were alerted to the attack by a local, Jamarcus Bullard, who saw the beast swallowing Peckham. "I noticed it had a body in its mouth, like a lower torso," he said. *metro.co.uk, 10 June; mirror.co.uk, 11+14 June 2024.*

**CCTV cameras in a gym in Pontianak, West Kalimantan, Indonesia, captured the death of one of their patrons, a 22-year-old woman identified by the initials FN. She was exercising on a treadmill which was only 60cm (2ft) from the gym's open third-floor window, when she stumbled backwards off the device then tripped over the low 30cm (1ft) height wall below the window and fell out. FN can be seen desperately attempting to clutch at the window frame before crashing to the ground three stories below. Emergency services rushed her to hospital with severe head injuries, but she died shortly after. There were warning labels telling patrons not to open the windows, but these were obscured and often unheeded, and the personal trainer on duty, who would normally ensure any opened window was swiftly closed, was on a break at the time of the accident.** ***dailymail.co.uk, 8 July 2024.***

As part of preparations for his sister's wedding in Thanisandra, east Bengaluru, India, Yogesh R, 24, borrowed a motorbike that he then took to the CNS Car Spa, where his friend Murali, 23, worked, to be washed. Once it had been washed, Murali dried the bike with air from a high-pressure compressor and bantered with Yogesh. While doing so, he directed a blast of air at Yogesh's face and they started fooling around. During their horseplay Yogesh, who was wearing shorts, bent over, and Murali took the opportunity to direct the air blast up the legs of Yogesh's shorts', close to his bottom. Although Murali did not actually insert the air hose into Yogesh's anus, high pressure air forced itself into Yogesh's rectum, causing it to rupture and his colon to prolapse, spilling out onto the spa floor. Yogesh collapsed, unconscious and bleeding heavily, and was rushed to hospital, but despite treatment, his condition worsened, and he died 48 hours later. *Times of India, 29 Mar 2024.*

**Five Sri Lankan fishermen died after drinking an unknown liquid from bottles they found floating in the sea. The men were aboard a vessel named Devon, 320 nautical miles out to sea off the town of Tangalle on the southern coast of Sri Lanka, when they spotted several bottles containing what they believed was alcohol floating past. They retrieved them and shared out the contents, but before long, crew members began to feel sick and collapsed, although not before handing some of the bottles over to other fishing boats. Responding to a distress signal, the Sri Lankan Navy mounted a rescue, but despite arriving in time to give medical assistance, five of the fishermen died; another remains in a critical condition. The Navy is unsure what the bottles actually contained, but were trying to track down the boats that the Devon crew had shared them with before anyone else drank the substance.** ***odditycentral.com, 3 July 2024.***

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